

仮想領域の

ELVISION virtual region.
003_Cerulean requiem

上智一麻

JOCHI KAZUMA

Illus. nauribon

003

セルリアン
・レクイエム



エリシオン
バーチャル
リクエスト

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003.

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Prologue - Chance Meeting

That meeting was a miracle.

It was as if the cold night was biting into her body.

A girl from a cyber-related company who was participating in a party held in a certain remote city——Kiritou Haya looked up at the night sky and spat out a sigh.

"...it really is cold."

Snow slowly fell from the sky and scattered on the ground, lit up by the pale moonlight, the scenery's beauty was fantastic. ...but it was a cold, winter night. Although she had a cape on top of her thin party dress the wind has robbed her body of heat in no time.

I need to hurry and go back... well, it's not like there's any difference whether I'm there or not.

Although it was a meeting of the Kiritou Group, she was only twelve years old and served as an 'accessory of the Kiritou Group leader'. There was no value in her being there. In fact, no one noticed that she left the site.

Even so, unmanned security shouldn't be careless, should it. Although I can understand wanting to boast about their products to others.

The organizers of the night's party was a famous company involved in manufacturing drones. That was why the most advanced drones were deployed around the venue on which the party was held. They must have had a lot of confidence to do such a flashy début right before the party.

She went past the main entrance hall and entered a slightly open area.

As snow lightly poured down, she cleared her thinking by taking a deep breath several times.

The mask she hid behind——'a young lady' and 'the real Kiritou Haya'. Although she tried to find the boundary between them, it wasn't working.

".....haa."

Sometimes she didn't know.

A lifestyle that didn't allow her to reveal to anyone what she really felt—— just which one was 'her true self'. Was that mask made from scratch, or maybe it was born from something already existing.

As she sought to perfectly play her role, the boundary between her 'selves' started to fade.

"...what can I say."

Although she was mocking herself, she knew very well in what state she was in. Even though it was obvious no one was nearby, her tone of voice didn't go back to normal. She could no longer crudely retort to her own thoughts unless she put her mind to it.

It felt as if her body and mind were going to separate. She ignored her own will, Kiritou Haya's personality switches, attracted by the image spreading around her.

——Even if I think about it, it can't be helped.

In order to leave the cold scenery she turned on her heel, leaving her white breath behind. And then, she heard a sound from the building in the back.

"...just now."

She stopped moving and listened. It wasn't clear since snow absorbed the sound, but she definitely heard it. It sounded as if someone has dropped something. Haya recalled the map of the party site in her head.

In the back of the kitchen?

There was a light meal given at the party site. It wasn't weird to have people in kitchen... but that sound was too rough, a bit unnatural.

...let's take a look.

Driven by curiosity, Haya went towards where she heard the sound come from.

A light crispy sound could be heard as she walked through the snow, she quietly peeked from behind a corner. Then from the kitchen's widely opened back door, a little shadow came out from inside.

For a moment she thought *Is that a cat?* but soon she rejected the idea after she saw the size of the shadow.

Judging from the height, it seemed like a child? Although she couldn't see well because it was dark, but it had something stuffed in its bag.

Could it be a thief? ...I need to report to the security drones.

Haya opened a window to notify the security. However, her movement was restricted by the pair of eyes of the shadow.

"_____!"

At that moment, the shadow poised like a wild beast and dashed—— straight into Haya.

"Eh, w-wait——kyaa?!"

It was too sudden for her to do anything, blown away by the shadow Haya rolled over in the snow. Using that as an opportunity, the shadow ran beside her and disappeared in the darkness.

"T-tthat hurt... w-what was that? ——Eh?"

As she stood up, she felt her right hand feeling uncomfortable. She checked it fearfully... not there.

A bracelet she always wears during parties. It was an accessory decorated with small gems, it was gone from her right wrist. She checked around to make sure if it didn't drop on the ground, but it was nowhere to be found.

".....stolen?"

She muttered that stunned, and immediately started running. Her favourite bracelet was stolen, and it was infuriating. But that wasn't why she was ran.

This is bad! How am I going to tell Father I lost it...!

The one who gave it to her was her father——Kiritou Kouya.

For a daughter of Kiritou, an existence that had been educated to act like a proper lady, losing such a thing would be a huge scandal. The misconduct couldn't be recovered no matter the price paid.

Fortunately, she saw the shadow's back soon after.

"Found you...! Stop right now!"

The thief was quite slow. It was at a speed even Haya could catch up to, even though she was wearing a party dress that forbid her to sprint. Moreover, she was heading towards the main gate around where security drones were deployed at.

"Great, now... hey, no wayy?!"

Even if she runs she'll get caught——just when Haya thought so, what entered her vision was an unbelievable scene. She crudely protested against it while changing the way she spoke.

As the drones detected a suspicious person approaching, the shadow manipulated a window with a practiced hand. Then, as if losing all their power the drones suddenly stopped. Passing by the drones which have turned into immobile figurines, the shadow escaped from the premises.

clink, Haya, who was startled by the metallic sound, panicked and followed her in a hurry.

She's hacking in while running?! Is that a joke? There's no way that's possible...?!!

That was beyond the common sense she knew.

The newest model of drones should've been a difficult target to hack. Moreover, to do it with just the computing power of a terminal and while on the move, it was beyond the region of what a human could do. With that said, that couldn't be a normal human being.

In any case, the top priority was to regain the present. After drawing that simple conclusion Haya chased the shadow which fled to the nearby park.

"Please wait! Give back what you stole!"

"_____!"

As she continued to chase the person running away, irritation continued to build up. It wasn't the time to do this, she had to hurry and go back to the party site...!

"Wait... hey—"

Haya didn't even notice her tone of voice turned back to original (normal) as she picked a fist-sized stone in anger. And with a beautiful form she threw it—

"I SAID WAIT YOU DAMN FIILTHhhhhhhh!!!!"

Along with an insult befitting a young lady, she threw the stone with her full strength.

The stone flew in the straight line and... **gosun!**. With a direct hit to the thief's head, a nasty sound rang out. The shadow lost its balance and fell to the ground.

"Geez, don't make me overexert myself. I'm taking this back."

She picked up the accessory which fell to the ground. However, the shadow suddenly raised its body and threw a punch towards Haya.

"That's cute."

But, Haya lightly caught it with the palm of her hand. She grabbed the shadow's arm and caught it in a hold on the ground. The joints creaked as Haya put some strength into it, the thief cried out.

"L-let go!"

"No way I'll do that. I'll say it now, I practice aikido. Don't think you'll get out of it that easily—."

"It hurtsss, ouchouch oucchhh——?!!"

For about a minute Haya held the thief's arm with a sadistic smile on her face.

When signs of resistance were gone, she let go of the arm. In order to see the face of the thief she flipped the hood—and froze.

Judging from her physique, it was a child the same age as she was.

But her face lit up by the moonlight was beautiful beyond Haya's imagination—the term 'outstanding beauty' appeared in her head.

Refined and clean features. Her long black-bluish hair tied in a careless manner scattered on top of pure white snow.

Although it was somewhat wild, no matter who was it, they would describe her as 'a beautiful girl who exudes a fantasy atmosphere'.

Haya stared at her in daze—

GYURURURU...

"———!!!!!"

A sound came from the girl's thin body—to be more specific from her stomach—together with that shameful sound, the girl's face was dyed red.

Inside of Haya's mind who was taken aback, the previous image of a 'fantasy girl' crumbled audibly.

That was Kiritou Haya's and Asumi Aoko's, the two girls' worst possible first meeting.

Chapter 1 - Light of Everyday Life

Part 1

It was in the middle of May, a warm day that was a sign of the coming summer. Seeing this refreshing weather, he could understand the opinion of people who said Spring and Autumn are the most pleasant times of the year.

"That's perfect, this is the 'troisième plus' [1] busiest time of Student Council; you're entering aren't you. You know why?"

The warmth and cheerful weather from outside didn't reach the place he was in, an abandoned school building. After school was over, in the school building's furthest classroom a dignified voice echoed.

"The busiest time is of course the time around the school festival. Of course there's the cultural festival committee, but they're too busy to help either the student council or the teachers. The second busiest time is Shinkansai which is similar to the school festival. Because there are many reckless guys trying to acquire club members for themselves, there are a lot of problems happening. Because of a certain trio that stood out in both cultural-based clubs as well as sport-based clubs, everyone rushed over to inquire about them which resulted in us getting flooded."

With a tone of voice that revealed that its owner was considerably annoyed, it continued over and over again.

... 'certain trio' was accented strongly, there was no way he misheard it.

"And so, the third time is now. A month after the new term begins, each and every student seems to be in a festive mood, especially the freshmen. I don't know whether it's the recoil after the examination war, but there are a lot of people fooling around. Thanks to that, the amount of work we have to do increases."



The girl stopped moving and brushed away her long black hair behind her ears. Her usually hidden self peeked out, normally it would have caught his line of sight and wouldn't let it go.

"Hey, where are you looking. You, don't you know what's your standing is now?"

However, it would not be good to look at the girl at the moment. She nudged the boy's head with her index finger. Dignity was exuded with every gesture the girl made, he felt a terrible disparity between that and her harsh tone of voice.

"...just what about this girl is ladylike."

"Ta-i-ga-. Did you say anything?"

She picked up his quiet complaint, The fake yamato nadeshiko Kiritou Haya was all smiles. But those smiles of her weren't reflected in her eyes, making it scary.

The boy who was sitting on the floor in seiza——Tenryo Taiga let out a small sigh.

It was Friday's afternoon, and it was currently the time that Kiritou Academy switched into specialized course lectures.

To explain why was he sitting in seiza at such a time, we have to go back two weeks into the past.

Taiga's little sister, Tenryo Fuyuki and her best friend from the past Karasuba Shio.

The two girls were reunited and became friends once again two weeks ago. Although there was an unnecessary obstacle that caused complications, they were able to safely repair their past relationship. Because of that case, there was an unexpected lasting effect——which had nothing to do with the case itself.

"Not only did you used my Arclight without permission, you also broke it... you're going to accept this punishment aren't you?"

What became a huge problem, was him borrowing (practically without permission) two Arclights in order to head to where Fuyuki and Shio were. After defeating 『Zygote』 and logging out he carelessly dropped it on the floor.

The Arclights were machines that allowed the human spirit enter the virtual world. Although they were quite durable, they aren't supposed to be handled so roughly.

Moreover, the worst thing was the fact that the Arclight Taiga dropped was one of the rare custom-made models prepared by one of the four cyber-related companies, 'Namisagi'.

On top of being ignorant when it comes to machines, all he had in his head at the time was Fuyuki so he forgot to adjust his strength, which resulted in the Arclight being damaged. And now, after everything was calm down he was being scolded. By the way, the one who told him to sit in seiza was Haya.

"...I'm sorry for breaking it. I'll do anything to compensate you."

"What compensation, come on. Do you know how valuable this Arclight was?"

"Was it that expensive?"

"It's a special made-to-order good. If I were to auction it... well, about a million yen I guess?"

"Milionn?! Wait, wait a moment. Why did you bring something like that to school!!!"

That number of digits normally doesn't appear in daily life.

The Arclight was held in a case before, there was no need to use any key to open it. Anyone could take it and leave with it were they to feel like it. It was too careless.

"It couldn't be helped. Were I to keep it in the house it might have been disposed of without my permission."

"Who would dispose of such a valuable thing?"

"Kiritou Group leader, Kiritou Kouya."

"...your Father?"

"Yes, blood related."

Haya didn't even try to hide her look of displeasure, she sat on the couch with a strong momentum and crossed her legs.

Various things became visible to Taiga who was sitting in seiza, he wondered if she was aware of it. For the time being he averted his gaze.

"Why would your father throw away your personal belongings? Is it because it's a product of another of the four major companies?"

"There's that but... I've told you before didn't I, about Asumi Aoko."

"Ahh, you said she was your friend who died last year, right?"

"It's Aoko's memento, this Arclight."

"...seriously?"

He was told something so amazing in a frank tone.

"Two years ago, I was sent two of them as a present celebrating entering this school. Since there were two of them, I gave one to Aoko. Although Aoko was a researcher, she wasn't getting along with the leaders. After she died, most of her personal belongings were disposed of."

"That seems... like she was really hated."

"I guess. The only memento I managed to recover before it was disposed of is this Arclight."

"So it was that important... I'm sorry."

Taiga felt really apologetic and bowed deeply. He knew that the problem won't be resolved by him apologizing, but that's the only thing he could do.

After seeing him make a concerned expression as he looked down, Haya put a finger on her lips pondering.

Of course she didn't think of whether to forgive him or not——rather, she thought of how to take advantage of this situation.

Honestly speaking, she wasn't all that fond of that Arclight. It was true that it was a keepsake, but the reason she clung to it wasn't its properties but more like 'because it's rare'.

Then what should she have Taiga who was sitting in seiza do... because she was irritated by the amount of work to do, she told him to help with that in an outburst of anger.

The work in Kiritou is all right, student council's is—...geez, I have no idea about the school events.

In her mind, she spat out words unbefitting the Student Council President.

Shinkansai was over, and the club activities began in earnest. The student Council was pretty busy.

Although she didn't want to do it, Haya as the student council president was required to make the final decision and look through almost all of the projects. There were a ton of them.

If there were at least one more person in charge of filling the documents—

—
"...ah, there is."

Of course there is one. Someone whom she could use as she pleases (in a psychological sense), moreover this someone who feels like he owes her a lot was right in front of her.

"Hey Taiga, you know about the work you were helping out with until the last week right?"

"The one you made me do in exchange for helping us contact Shio..."

"Then that's perfect. Starting from next Thursday help me out again. If you do that, I'll forget about the matter of the Arclight."

"...it's all right with just that?"

It was an unexpectedly good turn of events for him. As he asked about it, Haya shook her hands while saying "I don't mind.". Well, if she says so then he won't complain about it.

"Even so, what's happening next week... ah, the midterms are over aren't they."

"That's right."

It was nearly halfway through the semester. No different from all other educational institutions, Kiritou Academy had the first hurdle for the students, three days of mid-term exam. Knowing about routine testing ever since admission, Taiga continued to study diligently every day.

"Speaking of the tests, are you all right? It would be a troublesome matter for me were you to be in the red."

"Troublesome?"

Even if he was to be in the red, that was Taiga's own problem. It should have nothing to do with Haya. When he thought like that...

"If a student of the cyber department is in the red, all teachers in charge of specialized courses are contacted. The teacher in charge is called and said to come directly."

"That means, if I fail..."

"The fact that 『Configuration of virtual personality』 is a fictional lecture will be revealed."

The specialized course called 『Configuration of virtual personality』 they were officially registered with didn't really exist. The teacher in charge

'Takiha Yori' was just an anagram of 'Kiritu Haya', it was a fictional lecture Haya prepared.

"Means we'll get punished if it's found out."

"Of course. ——Iora, come out."

As Haya called out, a fairy-like small girl in a blue outfit appeared in mid-air——AI • Iolite. It was a personality made by Haya's program.

⟨"Called me, damn it?"⟩

"If I'm not wrong, the first years were supposed to have a small test yesterday. How were Taiga's results?"

⟨"Yesterday...? Was there supposed to be a small test yesterday?"⟩

As Haya questioned her, Iora tilted her neck cutely. She closed her eyes to explore her memory, she didn't seem to find it.

"There was one, hey... I told you that yesterday. How can you forget it despite being an AI?"

⟨"Grr... O-oh, I've entered the damn database."⟩

...?

Haya frowned wondering.

Iora had no functions that would allow her to forget any data. That's why 'forget' was used as a joke... she wondered if some kind of bug had occur.

Need to take note of it.

She moved the doubt to the corner of her mind leaving it for later and asked again.

⟨"Want me to be honest?"⟩

"...considering your figure of speech, it must be terrible."

⟨ "The bad parts are really horrible, the good parts are really amazing. It's an unusually extreme academic ability. The memorization-based subjects are perfect, in exchange both classical and modern language are fucking below the red line." ⟩

"What's that. Does someone like that really exist?"

⟨ "Honestly I'm lost, I don't know whether I should call him an idiot or moron." ⟩

"Aren't both of them the same? Hey, so you thought of me like that Iora!?"

⟨ "Ops. Slip of the tongue." ⟩

Iora revealed an evil smile just like that of her Master (just a little bit less sharp). Why does she have to resemble her in this kind of manner.

"Well, let's leave how Taiga's head works aside... how are the midterms going to look at this rate."

⟨ "It's almost certain he's going to fail." ⟩

"Not good... there's only three days left until the test. He won't make it."

"No, I've been studying lately instead of entering Elysion."

"Someone like you who has no foundation whatsoever can't study alone. And Iora who took upon herself the role of your teacher is quite ignorant of feelings, unable to do neither classic nor modern language... can't be helped."

Haya let out a small sigh as if giving up. And—

"This Sunday, I'll be coming to your house to help you study. Prepare yourself."

"...ha?"

To this sudden declaration, Taiga responded with a dumb expression.

Part 2

"...then Onii-san won't be coming on for a while?"

"That's right. Geez, what is he gonna do about the school exams."

A girl's voice resounded in a blue glittering cave that couldn't exist in reality.

The voice echoed again and again as it hit the walls made out of crystal clear ore and was twisted so much that it came back as if it was a wild animal's voice.

After a chorus of ten or twenty voices calmed down, a girl with chestnut brown hair took a step forward.

"Hey, it's about time to stop talking! Prepare yourself, you two!"

Between her five fingers she held characteristic pebbles, 《Creative Stones》. A girl in white coat, Saionji Rui dropped her waist lower in preparation for the swarm of enemies incoming. Ready anytime, that's what the posture seemed to relay.

"They finally come out. They had us walking for quite a while."

"...we were walking for only about five minutes, Hime-chan."

Seeing Rui's movement in front of them, the two also prepared their weapons.

With long and glossy black hair reaching her waist, a girl in a remodelled kimono decorated with black and red colours——Tenryo Fuyuki.

And with faintly shining silver hair, a girl in a hunter costume in the image of elves——Karasuba Shio.

They were armed with a red folding fan and a bow, they deployed them in order to cover Rui and looked ahead towards the back of the cave.

"Umm, while Rui-chan is attracting enemies, Hime-chan and I are supposed to attack right?"

"Yep yep. Fuyuki will attack from range, and Shio-chan will aim her tracking bullets just like a sniper. ——Let's go!"

Eventually about a pack of wolves numbering over thirty appeared from the darkness, they all had transparent bodies.

"Crystal wolves. They are the weakest among the monsters in here, but since the two of you have a weak defence, don't go in front. Especially Shio-chan!"

"I know, Little Sister's defence is very low."

Rui jumped in front with a strong momentum, the wolves raised a howl.

As the pack of wolves spread to the full width of the cave, the thrown Creative Stones changed into blades, and just a moment after that arrows of flame were released.

The blades which landed under the wolves exploded with a flash blowing them into pieces.

And the flame arrow divided into an infinite number of smaller ones while in the air, and after homing in on the quickly-moving wolves shot them down one after another.

"YAAAAAAAAAaaaa!"

After they were herded together, Rui threw blades in there. Threatening the enemy with a medium-ranged attack to bring them in to close range——that was Rui's basic tactic.

The enemy ranks were destroyed completely, however half of them that stayed in the back and were unaffected by Rui's attack, bared their fangs and attacked with vigour. The completely neglected other half turned their sharp fangs towards Fuyuki and Shio who were staying in the back.

They completely ignored Rui's movements, Fuyuki sighed lightly.

"Seriously... first you tell us not to get in front, and then you go leaving the half to us. Aren't you contradicting yourself?"

"That's quite responsible of Rui-chan, isn't it... what do we do?"

"Little Sister will stop them from moving, Shii-chan will deal the finishing blow."

"Yup, got it."

Neither Fuyuki nor Shio were panicking, they calmly prepared to intercept the wolves.

Right before they could be devoured by the wolves, Fuyuki destroyed four Elemental Spheres. Two blue and two white ones right after they appeared.

"Square Spell—— 《Cocytus》 "

In response to her voice command, countless amounts of icicles appeared from the walls, the floor and the ceiling. The scattered pack of wolves were hit by the icicles and frozen in the mid-air.

"I leave the rest to you."

"Yup. —— 《Partizan》 !"

A huge rotating spear of ice was released in a straight line, or rather it was released piercing through the crystal wolves that were lined up.

The thick ice spear pierced through the wolves with as much ease as it would have piercing a human body and disappeared in the depths of the cave.

A secondary world made up of data——Elysion

A world similar to a mythological utopia, created and maintained with various electronics. It became a necessity people cannot live without these days.

There was a countless number of structures making up this world, one of them was 《Aries》 . A virtual space based on a fantasy world. In here Taiga and Fuyuki——the Tenryo siblings had their part-time job. Their work was akin to playing a game, they subdued monsters. It was quite good in its own way.

In the southern part of it, there was an A-ranked difficulty dungeon named 'Crystal Cave'. Inside of it, there were Fuyuki, Rui and Shio.

"Oh—ho—, it seems you cleared them up over here as well."

"...why are you going 'Oh—ho—' now."

Fuyuki was clearly annoyed and hit her best friend who laughed optimistically.

"Brother isn't here, Rucchan's the only vanguard you know? It'll be troubling if you don't do it more seriously."

"I know that. Isn't our current goal a rank up & special training for Shio-chan? That's why it would be troubling unless she fought as well. Am I wrong?"

"...you're not. But please say a few words in advance next time."

Certainly, they were hunting in order to earn Shio a rank-up, if it's a group with both Fuyuki and Rui it could be done. However, if it's the player's skill then the player herself has to take part as well.

"I'm sorry you two. Helping me to rank-up..."

"It's fine it's fine. Since Taiga isn't here any way, we can't hunt anything down, so we have nothing to do!"

"You're really honest. But you're right."

"...but the two of you are in the same school as Onii-san aren't you? Is it fine for you not to study for the test?"

Both Fuyuki and Rui were also first years in Kiritou Academy Cyber Department. Of course, they had the same test in three days.

Although Shio never attended school, she knew that tests were an important event in school life.

"Little Sister and Rucchan study regularly. We won't do something as pathetic as studying right before the test."

"It seemed like there were thorns in the way you said that?"

"Of course. Just when Shii-chan came back safely and we should be able to play together, the four of us, that brother..."

"Well well, it's going to be his first periodic exam so let him do his best. Wasn't he studying in his room every day after school?"

"Because of that, the amount of time we can flirt together was reduced!"

"Ah, so that's the reason for your grumpy mood?"

Learning about her super selfish reason, both Rui and Shio were unconsciously astounded. Well, they knew that Fuyuki was a bro-con for years, so it wasn't all that surprising.

"...but wouldn't he be happy if Hime-chan helps him study?"

"I think Shii-chan is aware of that, but Little Sister is poor at teaching people..."

"Ah—...that's right."

Shio was being taught by Fuyuki before, it couldn't be called good even as a compliment. Fuyuki was a genius whose thinking circuitry was different from other people. She wasn't suited to teaching others.

"Moreover, Brother doesn't want to rely on his little sister. He's been working hard until a late hour at night."

"Lately, he hasn't been coming to 『Paradise』 either. Are his meals all right?"

"For the time being, he's living on the retort pouch type of food."

Rui's parents were running a café named 『Paradise』, ever since the siblings moved in a month ago they were eating their meals over there. Every day they ate a meal there in the morning, and went out to eat there every second evening.

Over the past few days, the siblings didn't show their faces together in there. It was natural that Rui would be interested.

"I see—... I'm a bit worried—..."

"Is studying that difficult?"

"Only a few people have trouble with it. Certainly, Kiritou Academy's level and especially the Cyber Department's level is high, but usually people don't have any problems with it."

Although Fuyuki said that, actually about half of the students who start in Cyber Department are busy cramming. If they are in the red, the person in charge of their specialized lecture is called, in the worst case they might get held back immediately.

However, Fuyuki (top student in her year) and Rui (the runner-up) didn't have to worry about such things.

"The test period ends in the second half of the second week, at this rate you should be able to rank-up before then. For now it's just the three of us."

"I wanted to show the results of the special training to Onii-san as soon as possible... it can't be helped."

"Special training?"

Hearing the unfamiliar phrase, both Fuyuki and Rui stared at her head questioningly.

"Ah, yes. Recently I've asked Onii-san about how to train my body. I just started but it seems like I've become more able at handling the bow."

"When did that happen? Little Sister hasn't heard a word about that?"

"About five o'clock in the morning? I wake up at that hour every day."

"Grrrrr, so early."

If it's five o'clock in the morning, then Taiga would normally be training while Fuyuki of course was still sleeping.

"Damn Brother, having trysts with Shii-chan behind Little Sister's back... unforgivable."

"T-trysts?!"

If a pair consisting of a man and a woman meet up in secret, that's certainly a tryst. In this case 'secretly' was a wrong assumption of Fuyuki's. Shio was impatient to correct these words.

"U-umm, Hime-chan! It's nothing like a tryst! I'm just being taught some tips by Onii-san, nothing else!"



She hoped it would be passed off as a joke, since their words were dripping with jealousy.

However, because Shio's panic button was pushed and she was completely flustered—it seemed to them as if she really was guilty of something.

"....."

With that suspicious reaction, Fuyuki stared daggers into her. Rui threw a warm glance at Fuyuki which said, 'ahh—it's like that after all' and ganged up with Fuyuki against Shio.

"...um, Hime-chan? Your face's scary?"

"I've wanted to ask about it for a while already, Shii-chan is older than Brother, so why are you calling him 'Onii-san'? Is there any special reason?"

"A reason..."

There was none—that was the truth. Not knowing that they are twins, she started calling him that knowing that he's Fuyuki's older brother.

But if she said 'there's nothing' that would be a lie as well—

"...why did you start blushing."

"Fuee?!"

As she recalled his sweaty appearance as he was changing and got intoxicated by the heat coming from her heart, her cheeks were grabbed by Fuyuki and pulled.

"Eres' othig Hwime-hyan."

"Listen up. Brother belongs to Little Sister, and Little Sister is Brother's. I won't hand him over even to Shii-chan!"

"...you're sleeping together every night, isn't this much fine?"

In Rui's murmur there was jealousy mixed in.

Although Fuyuki was jealous over every little thing, the one who would be spending the most time with Taiga would be her. That would be normal for twin siblings, but they go to the extent of sleeping together.

In that case, (important point) the one who spends the least time with him would be Rui. Since she also liked Taiga wanting to complain about it was granted.

"But a special training—. Certainly, Shio-chan's gotten really good. You don't miss with the piercing bullets any more. How is it, the new model of 『Cryoflare』 made by Rui-san?"

"It's much easier to use than before. Also, you have added a new type of arrow, I have more ways to fight like this."

"Well it is an attack-configured program made by Rucchan. The old one might have been a prize for winning a championship in the arena, but this one is a few stages above that."

The viruses and bugs that appear in this world——in order to defeat them after they take a form of a monster in 『Aries』 , an attack-configured program is needed.

Taiga's 『Heavenly Sword』 and Fuyuki's 『Elemental Sphere』 —— were attack-configured programs made by Rui, their performance was much higher than the ones that were commercially available.

And now also Shio's attack-configured program, a bow that could manipulate two opposite attributes of ice and fire 『Cryoflare』 .

Although it was originally a prize for winning the 『UNKNOWN』 tournament, it was broken the other day.

That's why Rui remade the program from scratch and also improved it.

As a result, despite having a week long history of gameplay in 『Aries』 , Shio's attack power has already reached a level close to that of an A-rank.

After collecting spoils from the defeated crystal wolves, Rui called out to the two.

"Come on, it's about time to go. Let's do another circle over the field, hurry."

"Fighting against small fries is tedious. How about we ignore them and run through?"

"Ehh, isn't it impossible with Fuyuki's and Shio-chan's legs?"

"Rucchan can carry both of us. We're light so the brute strength of an S-rank will manage somehow."

"Whether I can do it or not is not the problem, that's..."

The three girls moved towards the back of the cave while chatting. This was their current daily life.

Ever since Karasuba Shio joined them, the daily life the girls lived has become more fun.

"Ah, Fuyuki. There's something I want to talk about with you concerning the specialized course, do you have time this evening?"

"Sure. Through the phone?"

"Nnn, if possible I want to meet face-to-face... oh right. I thought of something nicee~."

"Something nice?"

"Nfufu♪ it's a secret~."

As Rui started skipping in good humour, Fuyuki stared at her in wonder.

Part 3

"Aahhh, so tired—..."

After he finished studying in his room, Taiga lightly rotated his arms to stretch.

He checked the terminal and found that it was already seven o'clock. Since he came back home at four o'clock, that meant he was glued to the desk for about three hours.

That's quite long even if I say so myself... even so, my performance isn't improving despite spending more time on it.

Although he didn't miss morning training, he hasn't logged into 《Aries》 for a week already. And that meant the amount of opportunities to wield a sword has decreased.

For Taiga, 《Aries》 was a valuable place he could unload his stress in.

Although they obtained a new life a month ago and lived it leisurely, but 'experiencing combat' was also valuable in modern society. Deprived of an opportunity to dump his accumulated frustration that way, had an adverse effect and his academic ability worsened——but he wasn't aware of that.

"...I need to switch myself to studying completely."

Let's prepare some rice in the cooker... and just when he was thinking about the menu, the interphone's bell sounded informing him about a visitor, Fuyuki's voice could be heard from another room.

"Oh, you're here. Door's open so please come in!"

"Heyaa, I'm a bit late. Can you carry this in?"

"What are you saying to the powerless Little Sister... Brother, please come for a moment——"

"Sure."

After responding lightly, he headed towards the front door.

He knew whose voice that was——or rather, there was only one person whom Fuyuki would call over——Saionji Rui was standing there in plain clothes. She was holding a shopping bag in her hand.

"So it's Rui after all. What happened for you to come this late?"

"There's something I need to do together with Fuyuki. Ah, please hold this."

In the shopping bag he was passed were vegetables and meat.

"What's up with these ingredients?"

"Fufu～ 《Paradise》 is on a business trip to the Tenryo house."

She loudly declared that while spreading an apron she took out from a handbag.

ton *ton* *ton*——a light sound echoed throughout the house.

Although Tenryo had a high performance kitchen, it was being wasted since no one used it. This evening however was different from others.

"Fu～nfu～nfufu～n～"

Rui was humming happily as she rhythmically cut the vegetables.

She had a yellow apron on top of her usual skimpy outfit and her chestnut hair tied in a ponytail swayed lightly.[2]

"....."

"Brother, you're ogling her too much."

Taiga admired the sight of Rui working in the kitchen to the point he didn't realize Fuyuki was talking to him.

It wasn't a seductive charm. Certainly the sight of a girl in an apron was something that couldn't be seen every day and had a considerable sex appeal. But more than that, there was something that put his mind at ease as he saw her cooking from behind.

"Hmph!!"

"Guohaa?!"

Suddenly an enormous shock hit the back of his head.

He looked up after his face fell and hit the table to see where that hit came from, he saw Fuyuki standing there making an intimidating pose, acting trigger happy with a clunky machine she was holding and looking down on him.

"I won't forgive being charmed by any other girl than Little Sister, shitty Brother. Shall I physically erase your memory?"

"I-Imouto-sama... just now that was dangerous... my head made a weird 'ding' sound..."

Before she erases his memory, his skull will be already cracked.

Fortunately, it didn't seem like he was bleeding (he was quite sturdy but he checked it just in case), then he recovered and started daydreaming while staring at Rui in her apron again.

"Want another one?"

"Sorry I'll stop right now... no, this somehow gives me a nostalgic feeling."

"Nostalgic, is it?"

"Yeah... a family, that kind of feeling."

Family, when that word came out Fuyuki downcast her eyes.

Eight years ago, the young siblings had lost their parents in a blink of an eye. That was probably why the siblings were so intimate with each other—
—as if to cover up that loss.

"Kept you waiting, it's done... hey, what's up with you two?"

"...nothing. Come on Fuyuki, sit down."

Seeing Taiga act as if he tried to cover something up, Rui was puzzled.

"Then, it's about time for Rui-san to go home."

It was past eight o'clock in the evening. After cleaning up and finishing consultation on a problem which was the main purpose of her coming over, Rui stood up from her seat and headed towards the entrance with Taiga.

"I'll escort you home."

"It's still early isn't it? I'll be fine alone."

"I just feel like taking a walk, so might as well. Fuyuki, go ahead and take a bath."

"Understood. Don't come back too late."

Taiga and Rui walked under the night sky and the street lights.

The café Rui's parents were running was a short distance of 3 minutes by foot away. The shop's exterior looked like a bar located in the corner of an alley that stretched from the main street——they arrived at café 《Paradise》 almost immediately.

It seemed like it was thriving in its own way, many voices could be heard from inside of the store.

"Well then, see you tomorrow."

"Ah, wait a moment. Won't you come upstairs with me for a moment?"

As Taiga was about to turn away and head back, he was held back by Rui.

"At this late hour?"

"There's nothing in particular that I want to do... but I thought 'it's been a while since we've talked with just the two of us—'."

She was embarrassed by her own words and her cheeks faintly blushed.

It's a chance——that's what she thought when Taiga said he'll take her home.

Whether it's school or 《Aries》 they were always accompanied by Fuyuki and haven't had a chance to be alone together. She was really frustrated about that.

"——Is that... no good?"

So this was her small selfishness.

It was impossible for Taiga to refuse her invitation as she peeked at him from under him. He shook his head lightly and followed her as she happily entered the shop.

They went up to the second floor from the stairs in the back of the store and entered Rui's room which was the furthest in the back.

"As usual, your room is full of stuff."

"Muu, it's not like there's a mess in here so that's fine. I'll bring you a coffee."

As Rui stood up, Taiga took a breather and looked around the room.

He has been in her room for like ten times before, but its interior hasn't changed at all. Since it was too silent, he picked up a Rubik's Cube that lay nearby and started to fiddle with it.

Since he was bored and wanted to kill time, he solved it immediately——or was supposed to.

"What?"

The movement of his fingers was somewhat dull, it wasn't working out well. Rui who came back stared at him as he struggled and started to think about something, she looked at Taiga's face from up close.

"...Taiga, can it be that you're tired?"

"Eh?

He was confused by her words. It didn't feel like it. But Rui was confident about the cause of his malfunction.

"Yup. Your eyes are more blurred than usual, so I can tell. Did you sleep properly yesterday?"

"Yesterday... about two hours."

"Why just two hours?"

"It's like that every day. I begin morning practice before four o'clock in the morning, I completely recover from two hours of sleep."

Rui was shocked, but for Taiga that was normal.

Certainly, his amount of sleep didn't change. But Taiga accumulated mental fatigue by studying daily while not noticing it himself, moreover frustration accumulated because he was unable to exercise himself physically. All of these have accumulated and turned into fatigue.

"Muu—..."

She made a displeased expression.

It's been a while since they were alone together. She didn't know when the next time would come were she to miss this opportunity. That's why, the fact that she thought 'I want him to rest' surprised her.

...it can't be helped.

"Dat's no good. Come on, over here."

"H-hey..."

Rui sat down on the bed and lightly patted her lap.

Even Taiga knew what that gesture meant.

"...you don't mean you want me to sleep there?"

"YES."

It was the so-called lap pillow.

"I feel like saying lots of things... but for now, tell me why."

"To help you relax? Come on, hurry hurry. Don't waste time."

He hurried towards Rui and reluctantly lay down. He swallowed saliva involuntarily as he slowly lied his head down on the voluptuous things exposed by her hot pants——

"Oh...?"

"How is it? Does it feel good?"

The moment he entrusted his head to it, her thighs sank in slightly and accepted his head gently.

A neither too firm nor too soft comfort continued to spread through his whole body and power left his limbs bit by bit.

"This is... nice."

"Right? Fuyuki said before that Rui-san's lap rivals the most comfortable pillows."

"How did such a conversation come to be...?"

It couldn't be something just friends talk about.

With that said though, he could understand why Fuyuki said that. It certainly felt good.

Since she was trained by working in the café, her leg muscles moderately accepted the weight of his head. He could stay like that for hours.

"...does Rui-san resemble Taiga's Mother?"

Rui asked an unexpected question. He was reminded of the conversation back at home and answered quietly.

"Did you hear that?"

"No, I asked Fuyuki about it afterwards since you two looked strange."

"I see... if you ask about resemblance, then you aren't alike. She was very different from you and couldn't do any housework at all. But..."

"But?"

"...the bright atmosphere around you is similar to hers."

She was an incredibly cheerful person.

She played with her children as if she was the same age as them, when she was doing her job she looked like she was enjoying herself, a human rich with emotions and facial expressions.

Those aspects of hers were similar to Rui's.

"...there, there."

Before he noticed, Rui started to gently stroke his head.

Taiga involuntarily narrowed his eyes feeling comfortable and warm, but what left his mouth seemed to say something different.

"I'm not a child..."

"I know. But look, isn't it fine to be the one that's spoiled once in a while?"



Rui
continued
to stroke
his head.

And as if
to finish
him off,
she spun
the words.



"Isn't it
fine to be
the one
that's Being
spoiled once
in a while?"

And so, she continued to stroke his head. And as if to finish him off, she spun the words.

"It might be because of Fuyuki, but Taiga's always on the spoiling side. You're taking care of Shio-chan as well don't you?"

"Well... I guess."

"That'll surely tire you out. Come on, Rui-san will spoil you so relax."

"No, that's—"

It happened when he was about to respond.

...eh...?

His vision distorted.

It was dizziness beyond what happened when he logged in, darkness clouded his thoughts and his eyelids closed by themselves.

Drowsiness?

Impossible.

Certainly he felt like falling asleep. But this was different. He should be able to limit it. During sleep, people are completely defenceless.

Taiga who was always wary of night assaults was ready to jump up at any sign of life. The only exception to that was Fuyuki who was his family.

That's why, being vulnerable in front of someone like this was—

"It's fine to sleep. Rui-san will wake you up later."

"No... but..."

"It's fine. Close your eyes."

Hearing her gentle voice and being patted on the head, his thinking gradually melted.

It was impossible for him to resist his eyelids dropping, Taiga slowly closed them shut.

"Sorry...I'll sleep...a bit..."

"Yup. Good night."

Seen off by Rui, Taiga sank into the world of dreams.

"Ha～... how cute～."

Rui stared at his face as he slept on her lap.

He rubbed his cheeks against her slightly and whenever she stopped stroking his head he frowned as if saying 'don't stop'. Every each of his reactions were unbearable and lovely.

"...Taiga's amazing. Not only Fuyuki and Rui-san, he even had Shio-chan fall for him. The amount of rivals increased by one again."

Although Shio's feelings still felt like an extension of admiration, but without a doubt she liked him.

While she was quite displeased by that, but at the same time she was proud of him.

Proud of the fact that the boy she fell in love with was so charming, that he made other people fall for him, proving his charm even further.

"...rest well."

She murmured lightly and contacted Fuyuki.

"Ah, Fuyuki? It's about Taiga, is it fine to borrow him for a bit? ...no. The shop's a little busy, so I want him to help out. Yup, about two hours. I'll send him home after the peak hours pass. Also one more thing, about tomorrow——I'm thinking of using the ticket from before. Can you call Shio-chan?"

On the second floor of Saionji family house, in Rui's room the two leisurely spent their time together.

Part 4

"...I'm back."

Her quiet murmur dispersed away in the empty room.

The Kiritou Group's headquarters that was located in New City——a tall building with thirty-five floors, on the thirty-third floor there was Haya's private room.

It was different from her dedicated laboratory on another floor, it was her own perfectly private room.

There was a Kiritou household's mansion built in a prime location of the New City, but she hasn't gone back there for years. For her, this was her 'home'.

She opened the blinds through the room's management system, vermillion sunset light entered the room.

As expected of a view from over hundred and ten metres above the ground. The view over the city was perfect. Haya took off her uniform's jacket and took out water from refrigerator, she sat down on a massage chair that has been taking care of her lately.

There's no work to do, so let's take it slow for now.

The company has been frequently dealing with large-scale structure problems recently, Haya already completed the tasks given to her.

At this time, she was able to enjoy a little bit of free time. Of course, unless she's entrusted with new work.

⟨"Master. Do you mind if I materialized?"⟩

"Go on."

From the projector the bracelet-type terminal attached to Haya's wrist was equipped with, the AI • Iolite's figure was projected. The figure projected was not the usual fairy-scale, but life-size comparable to that of Haya's.

"It's unusual for you to appear in this size. What made you change your mind?"

⟨ "I just feel like it, there's nothing in particular." ⟩

"...is that so."

Iora could freely change the size she appeared in. That's because other than 'navigation' purpose, she was intended to be 'the owner's friend'...

"This appearance, it's just like her..."

Asumi Aoko. A researcher affiliated with Kiritou and the co-developer of Iolite. Also, the one and only friend of Haya's.

A girl who was forced into researching things she didn't want to because of her talent, used and broken.

⟨ "Master, look at this dammit." ⟩

As Haya immersed herself in the sentiment while remembering the past, Iora held out a window towards her. On it 'Periodic test's expected problems 's exercise book' was written.

"What happened, this is?"

⟨ "You're going to tutor Taiga in his home tomorrow right? I've summarized the trends over the past few years, use it." ⟩

"...you made it by yourself?"

⟨ "Of course." ⟩

As Iora revealed a proud smile, Haya couldn't hide her surprise.

One month ago she noticed that Iora's emotions were developing, but for her to evolve to the point of 'doing something for someone else's sake'.

I allowed her to roam freely a while ago... it seems like it was a good stimulus.

Since she was busy and couldn't take care of her, there was no choice but to do so.

⟨ "It's your memorable first date. Failure is unforgivable." ⟩

"Ha?"

...weird. A strange term appeared.

"Wait a little. First what?"

⟨ "Ain't that a damn date?" ⟩

"What did you misunderstand to come up with such an answer..."

⟨ "But Master's goin' to a man's home, that kind of crap never happened before has it?" ⟩

After being told that, she realized that was certainly true. As far as her memory went back, she didn't remember going over to a friend's place to play, even Aoko who was her best friend lived in the same headquarters building. ...though, that didn't make Taiga special in any way.

It's been a while since she was able to rest.

But with just a single call, her leisure time has been crushed. As she lowered her eyelids dozing off, a window opened on the corner of her field of vision and she jumped up seeing the caller's name.

⟨ "Master?" ⟩

She silenced Iora with a gesture and cooled her mind off by taking a breath few times.

Deeper and deeper, she buried her own self in the darkness. The one who was in here was the daughter of Kiritou Group's president, a researcher—she used her routine self-suggestion like that.

"——Hello."

⟨ "It's me, head to the third conference room immediately." ⟩

An overbearing voice shook her eardrum without any greeting. She was instructed without being given any reason and thought of a possibility that caught her heart.

⟨ "I sent you a written notice. Carry it out as soon as possible." ⟩

"Understood."

The call ended with a minimal exchange of words.

Talking back to even the most unreasonable of instructions was unforgivable. Haya's father——Kiritou Kouya's words were an absolute chain in that it tied her mind.

⟨ "Is it work?" ⟩

"Yeah... I need to stay up all night, it can't be helped."

She checked the written directive sent by e-mail and let out a small sigh.

It was possible that it would take until noon tomorrow——until the appointed time. Guessing that, Iora's expression clouded over slightly.

⟨ "Will you cancel tomorrow's study session?" ⟩

"...no, it's fine."

Haya shook her head lightly.

Honestly, that was a quite tough schedule but... she didn't want the exercise book Iora went through so much trouble making to go to waste.

"I'll finish on time somehow. Will you help me?"

⟨ "Understood, Master." ⟩

With Iora on her shoulder, Haya went down the headquarters building by elevator.

Part 5

slooshhh, a cool sound of waves rang out.

The upcoming waves wet Taiga's feet and bounced off after finding resistance.

"....."

It was the sea.

Waves appeared on the crystal clear greenish water moved by the wind, it shone brilliantly reflecting the light of sun it was showered with. Pure white sand spread far and wide, it was white like chalk and hot, raising the body temperature through the soles of his feet.

By the way, it was still May. Too fast for the beach to be open for use.

"...well, it's the virtual world. I guess there are things like these as well."

Taiga looked up at the sun that radiated heat without any mercy and squinted.

What he was wearing wasn't his usual long coat, instead he was wearing black trunks.

Why was he in a place like this—he recalled what happened a few minutes earlier.

After finishing his morning practice he went straight to 《Aries》 after being invited over by Rui.

And the place she told him to come through 〈Transition〉 push was here—a new area 《Emerald Sea》 that was supposed to be implemented next week. Only ten people in all of Aries, namely people with an S-rank, were able to experience the area before it came out.

And thus, four people used that right together with her, coming to play in the sea.

However, there was only Taiga in this place at the moment. The other three told him to wait and left after passing him data for the trunks.

I can imagine what they are doing but.. did they really have to move away for that?

He had first hand experience, unlike in reality changing clothes took only a moment. It didn't expose anything.

Even so, they moved all the way to disappear from his sight despite not needing to do so...

...I can't calm down.

It felt as if a heavy blow dealt to him was postponed.

And then, the terminal's window opened as he received a call. He was suspicious after seeing the caller's name, but he immediately answered.

"What is it Leon?"

⟨"Heya. Got a moment?"⟩

The person displayed on the screen was an older man——Leon.

A player he got acquainted with when he toured Aries together with Shio two weeks earlier, leader of a clan named 『Lion Alliance』. He was one of few acquaintances of the same gender he had, so he stayed in touch with him occasionally ever since the incident happened.

⟨"There's something I'm worried about. You were investigating the 『Angel』 weren't you?"⟩

"Yeah. You got something?"

『Angel』 ——the unidentified virtual body that was the culprit during the incident with Shio.

Its purpose was unknown. Nevertheless, Taiga instinctively recognized it as 'enemy'. Although he asked Leon to continue gathering information about it, there wasn't any movements.

⟨"It seems like it's on the move big time. Various programs made by 『Angel』 appear not only in 『Aries』 but also other multiple large-scale

structures. This time it's attack-configured programs, and the rate at which it spreading is far beyond how it was last time."›

"Attack-configured programs?"

⟨ "Yeah, their performance is pretty good and I've seen an abundance of types out there when I recently looked around the city centre. For the time being I thought I'd tell you information on 《Angel》 . "›

After receiving Leon's report, Taiga started wondering.

Attack-configured programs were something essential to a large-scale structure. Although the most basic ones were given to people from the management, after getting used to those, people look for ones that have a better performance. That's why 《Angel》 's actions would be considered 'a godsend' by players.

But simply because Taiga knew Shio's case, he felt anxious over what 《Angel》 's real purpose was.

"...can you obtain one of these attack-configured programs? As soon as possible."

As Taiga requested that, Leon put a hand on his chin and thought.

⟨ "...even if I hurry, it might take a while."›

"Got it. Then how about three times?"

⟨ "Okay. Deal."›

He'll help them out in combat three times—he agreed on helping 《Lion Alliance》 when they were short of battle potential, that was the deal he made. When asking Leon for a favour, that's the method Taiga used. He already familiarized himself with it and he already got acquainted with all the members of 《Lion Alliance》 .

⟨ "Now then, I'll send you a mail if I manage to get one safely."›

"Thanks."

And after that concise exchange of words, he cut the call.

If 《Angel》 was on the move, that wasn't a good thing. That's the feeling he had. He had to stay vigilant.

"Sorry for the wait—."

And then, he was called from behind. He turned to look behind—and was at a loss for words. I'm glad to be here. He thought that from the bottom of his heart.

"Sorry, there were some formalities so it took longer."

"Nn... ah, no. You didn't make me wait."

"Really? That's good then."

It was just like her, Rui was wearing a bright yellow swimsuit and had a lovely smile on her face as she said that.

There wasn't much difference in the amount of exposure between this and her usual clothes when it came to the bottom of the swimsuit, as it was almost the same as the hot pants she usually wears. However, the upper body was a big problem. An unrivaled among the same age group of people abundant bulge was enclosed by a triangular bikini that obviously had not enough cloth on it, soft flesh was protruding from its sides.

"Muu... Brother, how's Little Sister's swimsuit? Is it charming?"

Fuyuki had notice where Taiga's line of sight was stuck, and said with a threatening tone. She urged Rui to step aside and moved in front instead. Incomparable with that of Rui's, his little sister's limbs were underdeveloped. She wore a black bikini.

Both the upper and lower parts were similar, there was an awkwardly small amount of cloth, at first glance it seemed like it didn't suit Fuyuki. However, that imbalance showcased her bewitching qualities that were hidden before.

As the girls showed off their dazzling figures, Taiga obviously averted his eyes.

However, the two of them weren't pleased with such an attitude and closed the distance on him. He took a step back reflexively.

"Brother, I won't tell you to stare a hole in us, but not looking at all is rude."

"That's right—. Feedback please!"

"Y-you two look great."

"We're not looking for such a bland answer. What you think about Shii-chan—hey, Shii-chan?"

Prompted by Fuyuki, Taiga looked at Shio who was a bit further away.

Shio hasn't heard the trio's conversation and was still staring at the sea.

She wore a one-piece swimsuit, it had blue and white horizontal stripes, it fit not only her personality but also her maturity. Shio called out with a lovely voice.

Fuyuki Tenryo

天陵 冬姫

"MUU...
BROTHER,
HOW'S
LITTLE
SISTER'S
SWIMSUIT?
IS IT
CHARMING?"

"WAA~!
SO THIS
IS THE
SEA...!"

Shio Karasuba

鶴羽 紫緒

Rui Saionji

西園寺 涩

Taiga Tenryo
天陵 大河

"SORRY
FOR THE
WAIT~!"



"Waa～! So this is the sea...!"

Seeing an emerald sea spreading as far as she could see, she was filled with curiosity like a child.

"...your eyes are sparkling."

"Speaking of which, this is the first time for you to visit a beach. Last time Little Sister was on one was eight years ago. How about Brother?"

"It's my first time on a beautiful one like this."

That was the concept, 《Emerald Sea》 had an atmosphere like a resort.

Tropical trees, dazzling sun. The temperature was adjusted to be warm but not too hot, the perfect environment for spending time was maintained.

"Hey hey, can I go in already?"

"Ah, yes. Sure you can."

Without even waiting for an answer, Shio rushed into the sea impatiently.

At first she was fearful of it, but soon enough she proceeded into water until her legs were completely covered with water and she released the strength in her limbs, allowing herself to float on water..

Her face melted and changed into a relaxed one.

"Somewhat, she seems really refreshed."

"Oh, Shii-chan... let's surprise her a bit."

Fuyuki submerged slightly and approached Shio while making sure she isn't noticed, it was a pitiful sight as Shio's face floating on seawater was relaxed and she was enjoying herself. Shio's balance immediately broke and she sank into the sea hitting the seafloor with her bottom.

"Come on, let's join them Taiga."

"Ah, hey!"

"Haaa! Let's play around todaaaay!"

Rui pulled Taiga by his hand and they went into the sea together.

He didn't know how long it's been since then.

"Fuu..."

Taiga went back to the beach alone and sat down under a palm tree on which he rested his back, he absent-mindedly watched the girls play in water.

...they're having lots of fun.

At the moment they were using rented water guns (they looked very similar to real ones) and were shooting at each other.

As far he could see, Fuyuki was losing. Rui was good at sports and Shio could be considered as someone who's familiar with shooting.

By the way, Taiga didn't join the battle, if he did it would no longer be a fair match.

Even if moving in water was harder than on the land, there was no reason to get hit by a mass of water that moved slower than live ammunition. Even if he held himself back, he would instinctively switch into combat mode were a muzzle to be aimed at him because of the way the water guns looked.

I can't even play around... what am I doing.

He stared at his own hands, to be exact he looked towards lower part of his wrist. A gunshot wound on his real flesh——although it was a very small wound that didn't stand out——but there was an old wound there.

A scar of the past.

As he was casually enjoying his everyday life, a heavy thought weighed on his mind.

You don't belong to this place——he heard a whisper like that.

"....."

Tenryo Taiga wasn't a good person who should spend his days in such a warm and clean place like this. He knew very well that he wasn't qualified to do that.

Even so, he hoped that he's able to stay in this place, he blamed his weak heart for that.

"Thinking about something? Your face is really dark?"

As he raised his face, he saw Fuyuki who must have left the sea before he noticed it and stood next to him. Water droplets were dripping down from her glossy black hair and fell on the pure white sandy beach.

"Where's Rui and Shio?"

"They're doing swimming training. Shii-chan doesn't know how to swim, so Rucchan is teaching her."

In the direction Fuyuki glanced to, Shio who was being pulled by Rui desperately repeated flutter kicks. Her movements were still stiff and weren't good enough to be complimented.

He watched that for a while.

When her practice time with Rui finished and Shio began to swim without aid, Fuyuki grasped his arm all of a sudden.

"...Brother, accompany me for a while."

She said that and began walking without waiting for his answer. Moreover, they went in a direction opposite from the sea.

"Hey, where are we going?"

"Further away... somewhere where we won't be disturbed."

The second part of the sentence was too quiet, so Taiga didn't hear it.

Fuyuki continued to walk to a distant part of the beach and finally stopped when both Rui and Shio were no longer visible.

"It should be all right over here. Yup."

She manipulated a window and extracted a light blue sheet and laid it down on the ground. After that she manipulated the window again taking out a small green bottle.

After it was passed to Taiga, he opened it and a flowery aroma tickled his nostrils.

"What's this?"

"Aroma oil. It's a program given to us together with the water guns, it seems like one of the items to enjoy in this area."



"Hee... hey, Fuyuki! What are you doing?!"

As Taiga looked up after looking at the vial, he saw Fuyuki turned with her back to him and removed the top of her swimsuit. There was nothing covering her small and white back.

Taiga looked away in a hurry, Fuyuki lay face down on the sheet and murmured seductively to him.

"Please rub the aroma oil on my body. Of course, with your bare hands."

"Haa?!"

Suddenly his thoughts were thrown into confusion.

Seeing him like that Fuyuki repeated.

"This is something that has to be applied by hand. There are places Little Sister can't reach, can you do me this favour?"

"Ask Rui or Shio to do it!"

"Oh dear, you won't understand unless I explain it to you, will you."

Fuyuki puckered her lips dissatisfied and shook her hair off her back as she admonished him.

"I want Brother to rub it on me."

"A...u...wh..."

He started stammering as she looked at him.

Taiga had no willpower to resist her seduction.

"Come, hurry up."

Invited by her, he knelt beside her.

He swallowed his saliva as he closed on to her pure white back and tilted the vial, golden liquid poured onto palm of his hand. It was more viscous than expected and it was sticking to his fingers.

"Nn..."

After splashing some of the sticky liquid on her back, he touched it. It must've been cold since Fuyuki leaked out a small voice.

While being flustered as her soft skin sucked his fingers in, he spread the oil while stroking her back.

"Brother, rub it on more firmly."

"G-got it..."

When he pressed the palms of his hands against her skin more boldly, the viscous liquid spread between his hand and her soft skin. The sweet flowery aroma drifted towards him and his thinking had been clouded over.

"Do it on the sides too, please apply it so that there's no places uncovered by it."

Her whisper penetrated his hazy consciousness, he slid his fingertips towards her sides.

Taiga's breath has already been turbulent and rough. It was the same for Fuyuki, whenever he touched a sensitive place, she raised a lovely moan, but since he didn't pay attention, he continued to slowly move his fingers.

——*funyari*

"Fuua....!!"

The moment he slid his finger further to the side, his fingers sank in softly. An exceptionally sweet voice leaked out from Fuyuki's mouth.

Uwaa... this is——!!

His consciousness returned and he realized where he was touching, he moved his fingers away in a hurry.

The place mentioned earlier where he rubbed the oil on was Fuyuki's humble chest, it was shiny and the way it looked could be called obscene.

"...any more... is impossible..."

Then, Fuyuki suddenly hugged onto him.

"Woaah!"

He was caught off guard completely and unable to resist, she pushed him down on the sheet.

Fuyuki's hands wound around Taiga's neck and her bare breasts pressed onto his chest. He realized the identity of two hard spots in the centre of her breast and the inside of his head turned white.

"Onii... Little Sister can't hold back any longer..."

Her whisper seeped into his thoughts like poison.

His heart was pounding fast and hard as if it wanted to tear out from his chest, all the senses in his body were roused as he touched her body. His blood was boiling and his brain was dizzy so he couldn't think of anything.

Not good. This situation is... the worst.

He needs to hurry and pull away, if he's too late——

"...let's entangle together until we're all sticky and mushy...?"

The sweet voice melted away his reason with ease.

"——Fuyuki!!"

Motivated by urge that rose within him, he hugged her thin body strongly. Fuyuki in his arms let out a happy voice and sweetly rubbed her body on his.

He could no longer stop.

With lust burning in his heart, he wanted to devour this lovely girl until she's exhausted——

"...eh? Where did they go? Heeey, Fuyuki! Taiga～!"

They couldn't afford to be seen like this——he thought that and regained composure all at once. He released Fuyuki and turned away quickly as not to look at her skin colour.

"H-hurry up and put the top on. They're coming."

Silence, no response. Fuyuki's frustrated gaze pierced his back, but he couldn't afford to let himself be shaken.

"...Onii's reasoning is weird. You went back to normal too fast."

Fuyuki opened a window and put the top on with it, she stored both the sheet and aroma oil as well. She went back towards Rui who was looking for them.

"...reasoning? Don't be stupid."

As he sent her back off, he grumbled softly.

"I'm completely done in right now."

He took a deep breath, and even as he released it the heat in his body wouldn't cool down. With nowhere to escape, feelings inside Taiga ran amok.

He couldn't cover it up any longer.

Tenryo Taiga was seeking Tenryo Fuyuki as someone of opposite sex.

If that happens again, he will be unable to restrain himself——he continued to breathe again and again, desperately trying to calm himself down.

Part 6

—-*guchyari*.

Wrapped in the pitch black darkness, in an unknown location. In the empty world light didn't enter, an unpleasant sound that seemed like a swirling mood echoed.

The source of the sound, was a water inlet.

The scene of the cloudy liquids that filled it rubbing against each other would disgust anyone with a decent amount of sensibility and morals.

"...hmm. Looks like it's going well."

Next to it stood a virtual body covered by a white robe.

The pure white outfit was shining conspicuously in the darkness of the abyss. Originally that colour should blow away the darkness, but something like a black pollution was sticking to it. It was reminiscent to how moths flock to light.

"—Generate."

It murmured a short command.

All the liquid collected at one point, and started to move eerily as if it had its own will. Spiraling, the pollution became more viscous and slowly hardened, shaping an armour of darkness soon enough.

Jet black knight 《Zygote》 .

It made Taiga and Rui suffer in the past, a virus program with high combat capability. Even one of them would be powerful enough, but soon after two, three of them were produced.

The pure white virtual body gloated over it as 《Zygote》 s appeared.

"It'll take few days until I have enough fighting force, will it. And then I'll break through security... fufu, it won't be easy."

Preparations were progressing steadily. If there was to be one thing that could stop it, it was——

"...Tenryo Taiga, eh."

That boy crossed its mind.

There was no reason for it, but it was instinctively convinced of it——that he will stand in its way.

To be honest, Tenryo Taiga alone wasn't that much of a threat. But his little sister Tenryo Fuyuki was different.

It was reminded of her abilities she displayed the other day. She could be the one who could stop its plan.

"Let's prepare some countermeasures."

Even if it was the slightest possibility, it had to be crushed.

《Angel》 formed another black knight, which disappeared soon after, as if melting into the darkness.

Chapter 2 - Quickening's Silence

Part 1

The next day, Sunday noon, by the front door of the Tenryo family's home.

The interphone sounded on time, and Taiga opened the door.

"Good day to you, Taiga-kun."

With a modest red cardigan on top, Haya wore a neat long skirt that covered her up to her ankles. She bowed with a meek smile.

"Although we don't have much time today, I'll do my best to raise Taiga-kun's performance... hey, what's up with that expression of yours."

"Sorry. Hearing your polite tone puts me in a bad mood..."

"You looking for a fight?"

After Taiga's extremely rude words, her mask of 'well-brought up lady' immediately disappeared, her true domineering young lady's expression appeared instead. Her personality switch's speed was as terrifyingly fast as ever.

"It's been a while since I met you in that *mode*. I thought my hearing had gone wrong."

"You really are a rude guy... I did it just in case because you have a little sister. The more people know about it, the harder it is to silence them in case of an emergency."

Well it's been already half-noticed... but he preferred not to say it. He heard no hesitation in her voice as she said these dangerous words. Taiga invited Haya inside.

"If it's Fuyuki then she's in her room. Well, she probably won't come out so you don't have to worry."

He told her the day before about the study session and she's been acting sullen since then.

After what happened by the beach, he couldn't face her squarely or try to calm her down; he stalled it for too long and the actual day of the study session came.

"Fine then. There's no time, let's start at once. Your room should be fine."

"Nn? Isn't living room with a lot of space better?"

"Don't be stupid. It'll be no good if your little sister comes in the meantime."

"That's only for you..."

Since there was nothing in particular he wanted to hide, Taiga took her to his room obediently.

As they walked down the corridor, Haya looked around as if she's seen something unusual.

"Hmm, that's a pretty nice house. Must have been just as expensive."

"Enough to blow away our savings. And here we are, my room."

"...quite bland."

Just as Haya said, the room was too neat for something people lived in. What caught her eye was the table in the middle and the Japanese sword that was hung on the wall.

Not only weren't there many things there. Everything seem neatly prepared, and the sword seemed ready to be drawn at anytime——that's the impression she had. She wondered just what kind of life the boy has been living up until this moment.

"I don't bring in many things, and I have no hobbies."

"And that sword? Isn't collecting fake swords also a hobby?"

"Ah—... that's the only thing I enjoy, something like that."

Were he to say that it's the real thing, she might have been excited about it. Although he wanted to see the look on her face as he told her that, he couldn't bring himself to do it.

"Come out Iora."

⟨"Understood."⟩

The terminal lit up and Iora was projected into the air. She's been wearing glasses with black rims she once had on before and hit one of her hands with the pointing stick she held in the other.

⟨"Today's strict teaching session. Prepare yourself dammit."⟩

"Iora's also in the teacher role today?"

"She's strangely motivated today. It's not really a problem either. So... ah—
—?"

It happened when she tried to sit down on the floor.

He saw her stagger and as she started falling down, Taiga immediately reacted and caught her.

"Hey, you all right?"

"I'm just a little dizzy. No need to worry... geez, for me to fall down after just one all-nighter..."

⟨"Master, so you were tired because of yesterday after all...?"⟩

"I'm okay so don't make that face. Come on Taiga, how long are you going to support me."

"Ah, sorry."

"Brother—, I brought something to drink. I'm ente..ri...ng..."

As Taiga tried to move away from Haya, at that very moment the door has been opened wide with a lot of force.

Fuyuki appeared with cups on top of a tray, she slowly lowered her gaze. There, Taiga was gently (from Fuyuki's perspective) embracing Haya.

"F-Fuyuki... t-this is, um.. an accident."

Taiga broke into cold sweat as he made an excuse, Fuyuki looked down with a lovely and yet spine-chilling smile. Then she put the cups aside from the tray and—

"Ogouhh?!!"

With a loud **dang** sound the tray has been smashed into his head.

By the way, Haya has fled into the corner of the room when the tray was swung up. She suddenly collapsed before, but her escape was quick.

"Seriously... I decided to check on you after all. Even though there's Little Sister nearby, you bring another woman to your room, moreover you're all over each other you shitty Brother...!"

She continued to hit Taiga with the tray time after time even after he fell on the floor. It was just a tray so it didn't hurt that much, but a loud sound rang out in his head every time he was hit. After she satisfied her urge to beat him up, Fuyuki corrected her posture and turned around to Haya. She made an obvious fake smile.

"It's been a while, Kiritou Haya-san. We haven't met since the Reaper incident have we?"

"Yes indeed. I have been in your care back then."

Haya instantly put on her façade and smiled softly. They both smiled but it didn't reach their eyes... that probably wasn't just his imagination.

"President must be too busy to teach Brother today, are you not preparing for exams as well? You can go back if you like? Little Sister will be the one teaching instead."

"Thank you for your consideration. But he's my junior who is in the same specialized subject course, also... it might sound rude, but Imouto-san seems somewhat unreliable."

"...hee."

Although she was told 'go home' by Fuyuki in a roundabout way, Haya's eyebrows didn't even twitch and the graceful mask remained on her face. Even so, it seemed like she was waging her a war, maybe she decided to take her on.

"...they are too alike."

He murmured it absent-mindedly, causing the line of sight of the two to pierce through him.

"Can you not say something that rude? Don't compare me with someone so intimidating and black hearted, it's vexing."

"You are being rude as well miss... but I agree with some content of what you said. I don't like people who cling to their family members like this."

"Is that so. What a coincidence."

"Indeed."

The girls showed each other a radiant smile, but Taiga who was watching from the side broke into a cold sweat.

It was rare for Fuyuki to show hostility openly (the case from day before must have fueled it), but for the façade-mode Haya it was also very rare. Normally she would have laughed it off to deceive the other party.

Just as he thought about that, he saw Iora beckoning him from the edge of his field of view. Taiga focused on listening to her while trying not to catch the other two's attention.

⟨ "Are these two on bad terms dammit? I have no memory of them being acquainted at all." ⟩

"They must be incompatible. Look, they're somewhat alike."

⟨ "I see, so this is what they call an aversion to their own damn kind." ⟩

Their appearance was alike as well (the long Japanese-style black hair). I wonder why does that atmosphere feel similar——Taiga thought.

"Taiga-kun, since there is no time to waste let's start immediately. Ah, Imouto-san please return to your room, you will interfere with studying."

"Is that so. Then I shall go back when I finish drinking this coffee, it would be a waste to let it cool down after taking an effort to bring it here."

For some reason Fuyuki brought three cups of coffee, she said that and took one cup of coffee in her hands and sat down next to Taiga.,

The way Haya looked at Fuyuki as if seeming to relay that she was being a nuisance, she sighed and turned towards Taiga once again.

"Let's focus on avoiding failing and focus on the weak subjects. First is modern languages."

⟨ "Let's go super strict today." ⟩

And like this with one person getting in the way which wasn't in the plan, the 'anti-failure study session of Tenryo Taiga's' began.

⟨ "...getting fucking wasted on the very first problem. That's surprising." ⟩

"Shouldn't you start over from elementary school?"

He started to feel insecure at the very beginning.

Part 2

The faint sound of a mechanical pencil moving filled the quiet room.

"....."

Although he hesitated sometimes, Taiga somehow managed to fill the answer sheet. Just when he managed to fill the blanks, Iora let out a voice.

⟨"Pinponpanpoon. Time's up dammit."⟩

"...haa, that was close~. I managed to solve it all somehow."

"You barely made it. That was a simulated test, you won't have time to double-check your answers like this, it's no good."

"Don't say nonsense, there's just not enough time."

Although Fuyuki who was sitting by his side admonished him, even though he did his best to answer it all. Before he noticed she went back to her normal way of speaking. The fact he was able to complete it was all thanks to Haya who proposed a study session.

Iora scanned the answer sheet and converted it into electronic data, then she called out towards Haya who was breathing quietly in her sleep as she leaned against the wall.

⟨"Master, it's finished. Master!"⟩

"...nn? Ahh..."

Haya opened her eyes in languid manner.

The book she was reading fell to the floor, its pages bent, she didn't realize it. Her tone went back to her usual one, but she must have been half asleep.

"Haya?"

"...I'll go wash my face. Iora stay here and score it."

She stood up while saying that and left the room with a wobbly gait.

⟨"Is she in a state horrible enough to make her forget Fuyuki is here damn it? She went back to her original self."⟩

"You and your tone of voice is turning weirder and weirder."

Taiga stood up and stretched his stiff body.

As he looked outside, it seemed like the sky was covered with thick grey clouds and light rain started to fall.

"The weather has collapsed..."

"According to the forecast it's supposed to rain intensely in the evening."

The modern weather forecast system is supposed to have an accuracy rate of 99%. The deviation from that number is close to zero.

"...speaking of which, it's the first time that AI over there has showed itself to me isn't it?"

⟨ "Yes. AI • Iolite, please call me Iora." ⟩

"Iora, is it. Hmm, you've wonderful emotional expressions. They don't seem to be fake. Is it fine to tinker with your mental structure a little?"

⟨ "Don't you dare." ⟩

As the two who met for the first time chatted, Taiga drank his coffee and rested his head.

Suddenly Fuyuki joined them to teach him as well, and he was tired by her and Haya continuously intimidating each other.

But it was worth it. I managed to answer the test somehow.

He wouldn't get too high a score, but it should be enough to avoid failing. At this rate the exams that start tomorrow won't be a problem to him.

The scoring was over, and they were reviewing it for about thirty minutes.

However, Haya who should have gone just to wash her face hasn't come back yet. She was way late.

"...I'll go take a look."

Following Taiga, Fuyuki and Iora left the room as well.

"That person was being unsteady for a while not. Maybe she fell down somewhere."

"Don't say such things."

His feet stopped when he was in front of washroom.

In the living room that has come into their field of vision, there was a sofa and the person they were looking for was on top of it.

"Suu... suu..."

She must have lost to sleepiness in the middle of her trip to washroom, she was sleeping while using a cushion as replacement for a pillow.

Not caring about her appearances, her clothes were all wrinkled and her hair curled up weirdly.

"Why is this person proudly indulging in her sleep while in someone else's home. Doesn't she know how to restrain herself?"

Fuyuki raised an appalled voice.

Certainly, that would be okay if it were her lover's home, but since it was a home into which she stormed in forcibly to teach him, he could not help but let out a tired sigh.

"Ah——w-well I guess. Look, she must be really tired."

"Why are you saying acting so gentle towards her. This is Little Sisters and Brother's house isn't it? Let's slap her awake immediately... no, let's throw her outside in this state. The cleaning drones will take her for garbage and throw her away."

"Stop that!"

It didn't sound like a joke at all and it was scary. Just how much did she hate Haya.

However, despite the fact that Fuyuki's proposal was rejected, they couldn't leave her as she was at the moment. Taiga tried to wake her up, but Iora went in between them.

⟨"Please wait a moment. Can you allow her to sleep like this for a while?"⟩

"...Iora?"

⟨"Master's been busy with work until right before she came here and didn't sleep a wink. If she goes back to Kiritou, no one knows what kind of damn work she will be given. I want her to rest properly."⟩

As she said that, Iora stared at Haya with a caring expression.

That look of hers, worrying about someone important to her, didn't look like something artificial, but like one of a real 'human'.

"Even if you say that, we have no obligation to let her sleep... Brother? What are you doing?"

"It's better if she sleeps on the bed rather than the sofa. Fuyuki, open the bedroom's door."

"Are you serious?"

"I've been in her care for many things, also having Kiritou's princess owe us is not bad."

He made up a decent reason.

But the truth was that he didn't want her to leave tired like that. Just like he was comforted by Rui, he wanted to let Haya rest as well.

...so light.

Taiga was surprised by how light Haya was as he raised her up and carefully carried her to the bedroom, while making sure he doesn't drop her. Fortunately, she was sleeping like a log and didn't wake up.

⟨"That's helluva large bed. You two must be enjoying yourself on it every day?"⟩

"Your evolution is really turning way too weird."

He was amazed by Iora who said a joke with a straight face, he laid Haya down on the bed and left the room. Right before leaving the room Iora turned around——

⟨ "...good night Master. I wish you good dreams." ⟩

She murmured with a voice harbouring emotions unlike a virtual personality.

...ah, this is a dream.

A lucid dream——a dream in which she was aware that she was watching a dream.

Although they said one could change the contents of the dream according to one's will, this was a memory of the past. A sight she was unable to reproduce, something that was lost.

In the middle of the illusion stood a single girl.

She had bluish-black hair carelessly tied in the back, she wore a white coat on top of a black jersey. Although she had refined features her clothes were a mess.

.....Aoko.

"_____, ____, _____. "

She was saying something in her memory, but it was barely audible through static. Aoko's mouth distorted proudly as she placed a pure white mannequin beside her.

...yeah. That's when the virtual body had been completed.

A memory of Iora's development's early days.

First of all they prepared a virtual body to place a virtual personality in, it was the scene during which Aoko enthusiastically showed it to her. She could remember her boastful look and her proud laughter.

Now that I think of it, she prepared a pointlessly high performance body...

It had high virtual durability and modification capacity as well as enormous calculation capacity, even if one looked around the entire world they wouldn't find such a high-performance virtual body——that's what she declared.

Speaking of which, it was at that time. The appearance of the virtual body was decided single-handedly by Aoko who used her own physical information.

She wanted to use my face didn't she.

She was saying things like 'Haya's face looks popular sort' or 'my own eyes look too sharp' and so on, she was just too ashamed to use her own face.

That's why she put on a lock on the body modifications to prevent Aoko from changing it.

Although Aoko could've hacked it easily if she wanted to.

Since she didn't do it, she wasn't all that much against it——that's what Haya thought. Although it was impossible to ascertain it now that she has died cause of illness.

——*Ah, I'm waking up.*

Her consciousness was rapidly returning.

I want it to continue——but her wishes weren't fulfilled, the dream continued to lose its colours and become monochromatic.

...I want to see more.

Until the moment she completely woke up, she thought of the friend she will never meet again.

"Hmmhmm... I see. I-chan's interpretation is really unique. It helps a lot since it's different from Little Sister's idea."

⟨"Ehen, there's more to come."⟩

After Taiga came back to living room, he saw Fuyuki and Iora talk happily.

Putting Iora's lack of hesitation aside, it was surprising for Fuyuki who has an intense fear of strangers to become friends with someone in such a short period of time. Well, Iora was not a human though.

It was around seven o'clock in the evening, large raindrops were falling from the sky as a storm was raging in the pitch-black sky. It was easy to tell how intense it was just by looking as the rain hitting the windows.

According to the forecast it's supposed to cease tomorrow morning but... looks like morning practice will be impossible.

Just as he thought that, the bedroom's door behind him opened loudly.

With hair so black it seemed like they were painted with a lacquer and dressed like a young lady heading to a resort. Haya emerged while looking like that——or should have, however...

"...um～m..."

"Uaaa～...my head's so heavy..."

Her voice sounded nothing like one of a young lady.

Although he wanted to ask her why did she act so wildly, but the look in her eyes told him she was really drowsy.

"...living dead?"

The figure which trailed unsteadily and looked ready to fall down at any moment wasn't Fuyuki's, but without doubt one of Kiritou Haya's.

So to say, it was beyond the level of someone suffering from a hangover.

"H-Haya? What's with you?"

"Shadap, movway... gonna was my face..."

While moving in front of the shocked siblings, Haya continued to move while bumping into the walls and furniture. When her figure was no longer visible from behind, Fuyuki murmured.

"...who's the idiot who called that thing 'ladylike yamato nadeshiko'."

⟨"Master is always like that after waking up you know?"⟩

"Seriously?!"

To think she could change into a proper and lovely yamato nadeshiko from that. They could only admire her in earnest.

⟨"That's the face she only shows after having proper sleep. It seems like she was able to rest dammit."⟩

"It's unthinkable for someone to get proper sleep in someone else's house."

While Iora had a faint smile on her face, Fuyuki responded strictly.

A few minutes later Haya came back refreshed and neat. With that said though, it was just to an extent where her pupils no longer looked like that of a dead fish, she couldn't be called a yamato nadeshiko as she was.

"...I'm thirsty."

"Wait, that's my water——she's not listening."

Haya opened the refrigerator without any hesitation and all at once she drank the mineral water that was inside. After that she threw away the emptied bottle and spoke with half-opened eyes.

"Want more."

""It's not all you can drink!!""[1]

She was acting too arrogantly, she heard the siblings retorted unconsciously. But Haya gestured at them not to mind it, or rather she proudly puffed her chest saying 'you guys are weird'.

"What, it's nothing expensive. You should be honoured that it was used for my sake."

She said something despicable and irrational. Both Taiga and Fuyuki were stunned.

⟨"Her thinking being very simple and her having a foul mouth are another characteristic she has after waking up. ...Master. Master. Get a hold of yourself."⟩

"Ah? What is it Iora?"

⟨"Fuyuki is looking. Is it fine not to put on your façade?"⟩

"It's a pain in the ass so I'll pass."

Ignoring what she's been doing up until that moment Haya shed off her mask. The fact that her thinking process was simple after waking up must have been true.

"It seems like I've slept for a while. Taiga's results should be fine at this rate... I should have some time to spare for myself now."

She glanced at the results of simulated test and fixed her hair and clothes with her hand. Then she made an elegant bow that made them fascinated involuntarily and flashed a refined smile.

"Now then you two, thank you very much for today. If you leak anything you've seen or heard today, I'll use both physical and psychological means to shut you up, thank you very much?"

""Go home already!"

What was refined was only her appearance.

"I'll do so even if you don't tell me that. Let's go Iora."

⟨"Yes sir. Now then Taiga, Fuyuki, until the next opportunity comes——"⟩

Just when one person and one identity were about to go home.

All the lights disappeared without warning and the room was shrouded in the darkness.

⟨"Uh-huh?"⟩

A power outage——all lights were lost, and the only thing that could be seen was Iora who shone with phosphorescent light. As they looked outside, it was not only their room but the whole city that was covered in darkness.

"It seems like not only this place lost power. The power plant must have been hit by heavy rain."

"It's not something that can be taken down so easily. This must have happened from the management——from our side. The power control system must've gone down in the headquarters."

New City's electricity management was done by a large-scale structure. It seemed like a problem has appeared in there.

"...it must be part of the problem from before. Geez, what is Kiritou doing. How can they allow such a massive power outage."

"Can you not say that while facing me? I'm not involved in this matter at all... but this is really bad. There's nothing we can do without electricity when it's this late."

In the meantime the emergency power supply was activated, but the lights that were lit were fairly dim.

"...well, that's how it turned out."

⟨"This room is consuming too much power. Fuyuki, you over-customized it."⟩

"Uh... it can't be helped. I didn't think it would turn out like this."

In modern times everything was controlled by a network, the power consumption of every household was enormous. The emergency power supply wasn't enough to supply an entire apartment with electricity. Moreover, Tenryo household was consuming more than a normal household, together with the power its security has fallen as well.

The situation outside was similar, the street lights and signal machines weren't working.

They were probably working while using redundant power that was left over from the supplying management's structure. Moreover there was heavy rain.

The natural light source namely moonlight was blocked by clouds, the visibility outside was the worst.

⟨ "Master, can we go back like this?" ⟩

"...I'd prefer not to if it's possible. Both public transport and taxis won't be coursing like this, and I would get completely soaked if I walked."

From the Tenryo family's house to the Kiritou group's headquarters there was about fifteen minutes walk. It wasn't a long distance to walk but the wind was quite strong. She didn't want to do it if possible.

Then, Iora came up with something and clapped her hands.

⟨ "Then how about we stay here today?" ⟩

"Ha?"

She said something strange.

⟨ "If you go back you will be asked to deal with the damn power outage anyway. Instead you can spend the night in this house and concentrate on tomorrow's test." ⟩

"Wait I-chan, what kind of selfish thing are your spouting. I won't allow such a thing."

"....."

Fuyuki drew closer to Iora in a hurry. Seeing the two like that Haya started thinking in silence.

⟨ "Is there a problem?" ⟩

"A huge one! Not even a friend, just an acquaintance suddenly staying over is no good!"

⟨ "But you've already lent us your bed? It's no different than that?" ⟩

"Unfortunately there is a huge difference! Listen, to begin with this house is a place for Brother and Little Sister to love each other without restraints— —"

⟨ "...ah, I apologize Fuyuki. I finished my business, I'll disconnect for a while." ⟩

"Haa?! Wait, I-chan?!"

Iora melted into the nothingness in order to escape from Fuyuki's persistence.

On the other hand, Haya lowered her face and grumbled.

"...indeed, there's that way as well. Even if I manage to go back while dripping wet, they'll work me to death. I wanted to rest properly today and I think nothing of bothering this guy..."

"No, you actually should."

Although she was saying that in low voice, her face was high enough to allow them to hear it.

"...that's decided. I'll be bothering you today. You have no right of veto, take care of me, Taiga♪."

As she said that, she made a maddeningly nice smile.

Part 3

"You're not sleeping?"

It was three o'clock in the night.

A windstorm and heavy rain rattled outside the window, a quiet voice reached his ear. Taiga who was looking at the ceiling in silence tilted his neck and looked towards the owner of the voice.

On the edge of the absurdly big king-sized bed——about a meter away from him was Haya, she was staring at him.

"...let me apologize first. If you can't sleep because of me, I'm sorry."

"...?"

He shook his head to protest against her suggestive words, Fuyuki who was hugging his arm moved closer.

Her sweet smell and the unique feel of a soft body strengthened, making his body temperature to increase by itself.

I'm completely done for aren't I, honestly...

Because of what happened by the sea, his rationality has been blown away completely.

Although he had been sleeping with her for a month, it's not that he couldn't suppress it just because she was beside him. He couldn't get any sleep the night before either. That's why he was honestly thankful for the third party that had appeared.

"What about you? Not going to sleep yet?"

"That's because I slept a little bit before. Also... as expected, this situation makes me nervous."

This situation——in other words the three of them sleeping on the same bed, was indeed delicate. Rather than unusual, it was something that normally wouldn't happen.

——At first Taiga wanted to sleep on the sofa alone.

However Fuyuki said 'me too', and they couldn't drive Haya away from the bed since she was a guest. In the end, they all lay down next to each other in the bed and decided to sleep like that.

However——

"...liar. Someone who's nervous wouldn't sleep while dressed like that."

Instead of wearing pyjamas, the only thing Haya wore was a male shirt.

Since the size didn't match her, there was a huge opening that exposed her collarbone and the moderately big twin hills also glimpsed from it. She wasn't wearing any underwear beneath and everything appeared from beneath because the shirt was slightly too short.

Honestly, it was poison for his eyes.

"This? It can't be helped, this is the only thing I could use."

"There were a lot of other things there. Why did you use this of all things."

"Because this was the best thing to sleep in. Also... you like it better like this, don't you?"

Haya showed him a mean, tempting smile and raised a hem of the shirt.

Although he immediately averted his eyes, he caught a glimpse of aqua-blue fabric.

"To turn red with a single piece of cloth. How unseemly."

"...you should learn some modesty."

"Ara, isn't that something you should tell your sister?"

He looked at Fuyuki's chilly appearance, as she clung to his arm.

Certainly, because it exposed a lot, or rather it exposed her underwear completely, Fuyuki's negligée was more erotic.

However, the way Haya was dressed was erotic in a different way.

It was all 'almost visible' and that 'almost' attracted his line of sight. Moreover, since Haya usually wore clothes that covered a lot of her skin, the destructive power was tremendous.



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Moreover, since Haya usually wore clothes that covered a lot of her skin, the destructive power was tremendous.

"Because this was the best thing to sleep in. Also... you like it better like this, don't you?"

"...oh, that's right. There's something I want to pass to you."

In order to change the topic, he removed a program from his terminal and passed it to Haya.

She received it and immediately opened a window to glimpse at information inside, she looked up at Taiga with a skeptical look in her eyes.

"What's this? This is an attack-configured program. I have no use for it do I?"

"As if I'd want you to. This is a new program that's very popular in Kiritou Management's structure 《Aries》 ——It was made by 《Angel》 ."

The moment she heard the last word, Haya's eyes turned serious at once. It seemed like she was also aware of its existence.

"How did you get this?"

"I got it from an acquaintance who's looking into it for me."

Taiga received it from Leon when she was bathing.

It seemed he must've struggled hard to get it since he said "Just three times won't be enough for this!" and requested an additional reward; since he managed to get it in a single day, Taiga agreed to increase it.

"...nyaa...Onii..."

And in response to their voices, Fuyuki leaked out a sweet whisper and rubbed her face on him.

In response to Fuyuki's 'I won't give him to you' gesture, an indescribable expression appeared on Haya's face.

"...you get along well."

"Well, that's obvious. The only family we have is each other."

It was a lie. To be exact they no longer were just a family.

But Haya wasn't deceived, she looked down and murmured.

"...getting along well doesn't happen just because you're family. Even if you are directly blood related."

She felt melancholic and put on a sad smile.

The only family member of hers that Taiga knew about was her father. And the words 'directly blood related'——he understood them to a painful degree.

"...I'm going to sleep. I'll wake up early in the morning and analyse this, you too make sure to rest properly."

Haya said that and turned her back to Taiga. She must've been fast asleep for good since she started to breathe deeply in her sleep about ten seconds later.

"...I said already that I can't sleep."

Taiga closed his eyes forcibly. Even if he can't sleep, he needed to rest his head in order to prepare for tomorrow. However, his determination has been overcome in a matter of seconds.

A quiet electronic sound could be heard over the sound of wind and rain, and he saw faint light through his half-closed eyelids. At the same time, a pale phosphorescent light appeared on the edge of his field of vision.

...Iora?

There, was Iora who disappeared in the middle of the conversation with Fuyuki. Now that he thought about it, he hasn't seen her since then and wondered why did she come back now.

"Iora, heey Iora."

⟨ "... " ⟩

She didn't respond to his calls, she continued to stare at empty space with unfocused eyes. It was as if her soul was missing.

When Taiga anxiously reached out to her, her eyes finally captured him.

⟨ "...ah, so it's Taiga dammit. What is it?" ⟩

"That's my line. Earlier you suddenly disappeared, now you suddenly come back. What were you doing?"

⟨ "Where did I go..." ⟩

She tilted her neck as if saying 'I don't remember'.

Iora disappeared eight hours earlier during the power outage so he asked that... but did she really not remember anything?

⟨ "So that's how it was darn it. I disappeared..." ⟩

She muttered and after twisting her body in the air skilfully, she sat down on top of Taiga's chest. Although there was no weight since she was a projected image, he felt an illusion of being ticklish.

Seeing dark emotions on her face, Taiga gently asked.

"What is it? You have an expression of anxiety on your face?"

⟨ "Anxiety... so Iora feels anxiety?" ⟩

"No, don't ask me. That's just how it looked to me."

It was his intuition. There was no basis for that.

But it seemed like Iora felt something in his words, and while her line of sight was wandering around, she started talking.

⟨ "...I'm worried about something." ⟩

Seeing her serious expression Taiga listened quietly. She opened and closed her mouth as if looking for words to say, and asked him a question before long.

⟨ "What would you do if you were troubling someone important to you?" ⟩

"...another weird question from you."

He glanced at Haya who was sleeping beside him. The 'important person' must have been her.

But with that said, since the question was quite vague, he couldn't find a clean answer to it. He pondered about it for a moment, and answered it after applying the situation to himself.

"I guess... I would try to do something about it myself."

That's the kind of person Tenryo Taiga was. Were he to be the cause, he would definitely solve it by himself.

⟨"Is that so... so that's the only thing that can be done."⟩

As Taiga answered, Iora put on a resigned expression. Seeing her like that, Taiga added more while quietly whispering.

"But taking all of it... and shouldering it all would make anyone collapse."

⟨"...eh?"⟩

He smiled seeing Iora dumbfounded and continued.

"It doesn't mean it'll definitely fail. But people have their limits. It's unreasonable to do it all alone. Someone like me never noticed such a thing."

Without anyone whom he could rely on, carving his path by himself was an obvious course of action to him——that's how he was a month ago.

But he was different now.

He reunited with Fuyuki, met Rui and Shio and understood that relying on someone else can be strength as well, as well as how precious a thing it was to support each other. He was also told that it's okay to be spoiled.

That's why he could tell it straight.

"Your Master won't break down that easily, it's fine to trouble her to a certain extent. But if you're still anxious then I'll promise you. I'll do something about it."

⟨ "...Taiga." ⟩

"Is this answer good enough?"

Iora gently put both of her hands on her chest, as if locking away something important to her in there.

⟨ "—Yes. It's all right now." ⟩

While saying that, a faint smile bloomed on her face.

⟨ "I'm relieved with this. Even if something happens Taiga will deal with it." ⟩

"Hey wait, you gonna leave it all to me?"

⟨ "Can't I dammit?" ⟩

As she curiously tilted her neck and stared at him, Taiga let out a small sigh and answered.

"It can't be helped if I you can't do it. But do your best to make sure you won't fail."

⟨ "Understood. I'll continue my futile resistance." ⟩

"Futile resistance... oh well, see you tomorrow."

⟨ "Yes. See you tomorrow." ⟩

Taiga closed his eyes, and his consciousness was buried in darkness.

Iora looked down at him, and went back to Haya's terminal soon after that.

⟨ "...I'm at a peace of mind. No matter what happens, Taiga will stop me." ⟩

Quiet, very quiet words that didn't reach anyone's ear have been drowned in the sound of falling rain and wind.

Part 4

Four days later, the last day of midterms.

"——Yes, time's up. Put down your writing utensils."

Together with the chime's sound, the class suddenly turned noisy.

The students began to talk here and there. It was the recoil of the stressful four days, his 'schedule after this' was already determined, and Taiga fell down on the desk worn out.

He looked up at Rui and Fuyuki who finished and were getting ready to stand up and leave.

"You seem really exhausted~, you okay?"

"Not at all..."

"How pathetic. It's been only four days. Rather than that, did you manage not to fail?"

"I don't think I will... probably."

He couldn't affirm how the last one, modern language went. There were more questions than on the mock test and it was quite hard. That could lead to a drastic change in his score. In the end, he could only wait for the results to come.

"The results will come in a week, right?"

"Yes. They will come together with all the other subjects. Brother can continue worrying up until then."

"...how about you two?"

"What a dumb question. It's already decided that I'll get a perfect score on all subjects."

"It is?!"

"Rui-san got about nine out of ten right~"

Taiga could only sing praises for them in his mind. It was strange to feel inferior because he was surrounded by honour students.

When everyone left the classroom, Rui clapped her hands.

"Then let's all go and play! Where should we go?"

"Hmm. Let's try some leisure facilities for once——"

"Ah, sorry. I've got something to do now, go ahead without me."

He was to go and help out immediately after the tests are over, Taiga received an email from Haya in the morning telling him to come to the teacher's building on the first day.

"...is that so. Then I'll go together with Rucchan the two of us."

Openly frustrated, Fuyuki saw him off and Taiga left the classroom. Although he felt a little bit guilty, it was better if he distanced himself from Fuyuki for the time being.

And the few hours starting from that moment were truly hellish.

First, he joined Haya and headed to the teacher's building while carrying precision equipment which was scheduled for use for the day; after that, he was taken to the Student Council Room which was located near the third year's Cyber Department building. There, he did a different job together with other Student Council officers; he continued to process and fill a huge amount of data together with Haya.

The time passed as he continued to earnestly hit the keys of a virtual keyboard——

"I-it's over..."

By the time it was over, outside was already dark.

Taiga was exhausted after five hours of continuous work and he sprawled out on the borrowed desk. The other members already went back, and the only ones left in the student council room was him and Haya.

"So the student council has an absurd amount of work like this... you're doing well not to die from overworking yourselves."

"Everyone's an elite in here. This much is still fine."

Since there was no one else there, Haya returned to her normal self.

She quickly confirmed the data prepared by Taiga and closed the terminal; she stood up with momentum and lightly stretched.

"Now then, let's go back for today. There's a long weekend starting tomorrow; let's continue next week."

"Yeah..."

The two finished and locked the door behind them and headed towards the linear station together.

Aside from the Sports Department who were practicing until late, no one from the Cyber Department, which was a genuine cultural-type department, cared enough to stay; the two walked through a dim avenue.

"...it's quiet."

"There's not many linears coursing at this time. All students other than those living in dorms have already went back."

Since Kiritou Academy was looking for students from all over the country, it had proper dormitories.

The student dormitories were lined up in the north, they were flooded by the freshmen who applied every year. By the way, Taiga and Fuyuki also considered entering dormitories at first since it was easy on their money but it was rejected because Fuyuki said "we won't be able to live together!".

"Speaking of which, what happened to Iora? I haven't seen her today."

"Ahh, she's became quiet after returning from your home. She no longer comes out. I wonder what kind of weird knowledge is she stocking now..."

Her eyes showed that she was quite troubled by that. Certainly, she has been quite humorous recently.

"No matter what form it is, aren't you pleased that she's growing? Wasn't that why you made Iora?"

"Yes but—...ever since the Reaper incident I couldn't honestly rejoice over it."

Previously, Iora was overtaken by a mysterious military consciousness extraction program 《Jail》 ——and transformed into what Taiga and the others called——the Grim Reaper. That incident triggered her rapid emotional development.

"...speaking of which, did you find out anything about the 《Reaper》 ?"

"Nothing. I found 《Jail》 's code inside of Iora, but it was restricted so it couldn't be hacked from outside. I didn't find even a single lead... oh, that's right. Look, this."

Haya passed him a document with data.

"These are the results I got after analyzing the attack-configured program from before. I also added some information I found about 《Angel》 in there."

Taiga looked over the document's content.

The summary 'An unwanted program has been embedded into the attack-configured program, judging from from the analysis results the possibility of it being the 《Zygote》 you told me about is high' was marked.

"... 《Zygote》 . So that's what was built in."

The parasitic program that infects a virtual body and creates a jet black knight with its data. It infected Shio's virtual body two weeks ago and made them suffer.

"It's a very advanced program. Infecting a virtual body and creating another one from its data isn't something even multiple programmers working in parallel can do."

"Fuyuki said the same thing. She said the creator must be as good as she was, if not better."

Haya was one of the senior programmers in the Kiritou company, and quite outstanding among them.

Even she couldn't understand half of the 『Zygote』's configuration. The creator was a programmer in a class of his own.

"If I were to believe your testimony and Saionji-san's, 『Angel』 was using Master Code. He must have gotten them either by hacking or it must be one of authorized people, it's impossible to judge that now."

As she said that, a single girl came to her mind.

An extraordinary programmer who perhaps surpassed even Fuyuki and someone who was involved with Kiritou——there was only one person like that.

But that was impossible. It couldn't be. Since she was already——

That's absurd.

She shook her head lightly and rejected the worst scenario she could imagine.

"I have reported it to the company already but... honestly, I don't think they will do anything now. They have their hands full with bugs at the moment and won't listen to them even if I say 'I don't get it myself but do something about it'."

"I guess..."

There wasn't enough information about it to make such a large company move.

Even so, the timing of problems appearing overlapped, making him anxious. That could also have been 『Angel』's doing——that's what he suspected.

"Also, Haya. Is there a possibility the Reaper incident and Angel are related?"

"....."

Haya closed her eyes in order to analyse the possibility.

That possibility came to her mind two weeks earlier when she became aware of Angel's existence. Were Angel to be one of Kiritou researchers there was a possibility they could access Iora and the timing would match. It was almost not possible for these incidents to be not related.

"...fifty-fifty, I would say."

She squeezed that out after a while, she wasn't confident despite thinking about it for a while.

"50%, that low? I have a feeling there definitely is a relation."

"I also feel like that's how it is. But no matter how I think about it, I can't tell what's 《Angel》 's purpose is."

They got on a linear and sat opposite to each other. They were about ten minutes away from the New City's central station. The train was quietly running in the night, and the conversation continued.

"There's a possibility the criminal did it without purpose, but that would be too far-fetched. Especially tampering with Iora would be too risky, and we don't know why would he embed 《Jail》 into Iora. There isn't enough information to judge it."

They didn't have enough data on 《Angel》 .

In Cyber World, both voice and physique could be changed and if Master Code were used, it couldn't be traced. They couldn't determine it in a situation like this.

Soon after, the linear arrived at the station and the two of them went out through the ticket gate.

Haya was going to Kiritou headquarters which was in the opposite direction from Taiga's house. It was where they parted. After they entered the crowded station, Haya put on a mask of a young lady once again.

"Now then, Taiga-kun. See you on Monday."

"Is it fine for me to not do anything tomorrow?"

"I don't have any time to spare tomorrow. We're supposed to work on the problems that recently appeared starting from tomorrow. Although it's a three-day weekend, there's no time for me to rest."

Were it to be her real self she would have sighed, but she only had a meek smile that didn't disturb her façade. That kind of business-like face looked to me like a stiff mask.

"...hey, is there anything I could help you with?"

Before he noticed, he already spontaneously said these words. Surprised by what she heard, Haya turned around. She closed on to him, leaned towards him and whispered.

"What? You want to work?"

"I just would feel guilty if you were to fall down like you did before. You seem unable to manage your own physical condition."

"Ara, so you're a guy who can spout such reckless stuff with cold blood."

She laughed merrily at him, but that wasn't something she had a right to say.

At the very least he didn't want her to overdo it in the long run; that would be very risky in a lot of ways.

"Help me huh... certainly there's lots of simple tasks you could help me with. But unless the source is dealt with, the amount of work will continue to increase."

"Can't you do something about it?"

"The countermeasure team was formed, but unfortunately there's nothing that would hint at the solution of the problem. Were Aoko to be still alive, it would have been cleaned up all at once..."

⟨"—Then what about Fuyuki."⟩

Suddenly, Iora appeared between the two without any warning.

"...that was a really sudden of you to come out. Why would Fuyuki-san's name appear here?"

⟨"Fuyuki possesses a considerable amount of programming skills. If it's her, it can be solved."⟩

"...certainly that girl's skills are great. It might not be as good as Aoko's, but it's far beyond mine..."

In response to Iora's proposal, Haya placed a hand on her chin and continued to think. Taiga had a premonition it would turn troublesome, but he gave up and looked into the sky.

"Yup, it's decided. The date will be... the day after tomorrow should be fine. Take Fuyuki-san and come to Kiritou headquarters. Just as you wished, I'll let you help me with work."

And like this, the sibling's visit to Kiritou's headquarters was decided.

Part 5

"Now then, this much should be enough."

Inside a room that was wrapped in a pale light, a quiet whisper echoed.

The 《Angel》 closed a window it has been tampering with and looked at a huge sphere that had about ten metres in diameter and floated in the middle of the room.

"Kiritou Group's headquarter's structure, the main server... as expected, it's big."

It couldn't be entered without a special passkey, the very core of Kiritou Group. In the cyberspace that managed all the systems stood 《Angel》 .

"But since they have their hands full dealing with trouble all over the place, I was able to slip in easily. It was worth it going out of my way to cause that power outage."

Because of the power outage happening, rather than switching to another computing power source, Kiritou's headquarters were swamped with a huge amount of complaints. A vast flood of information paralyzed the line temporarily and even if a handful of foreign matter slipped in, no one noticed anything.

Thanks to that it was able to move freely as well as prepare Tenryo Fuyuki's 『Prison』 . All preparations were done, all that was left was to start it.

"Mu..."

Suddenly, it felt a discomfort in its right arm.

Electricity ran through its arm nerves, and the arm dropped down losing all its strength.

"...seems like there's still some resistance. I thought the ego has been already smashed but... that's an unexpected tenacity."

The 『Angel』 said "Waste of effort" and grabbed its right wrist. A faint spark appeared, and the control over the right arm came back.

"...with this, it'll be all over. I won't let anyone get in the way."

Two days left until the plan is executed.

After displaying boiling hot hatred, the 『Angel』 disappeared from the main server.

Chapter 3 - Countdown

Part 1

pipipi—

It was eight o'clock in the morning.

The thirty-third floor of Kiritou headquarters building, Haya's private room.

After managing to get proper sleep Haya opened her windows and a tremendous sound hit her.

"...aa...u... ah—...?"

It was loud enough to make her block her ears.

She curled up on the bed for a moment, and then finally got up.

However, her movements were 'a little bit faster than a zombie', her aspirations were in pieces at the moment.

"...ahh—...time is...need to wake up...eh..."

Her posture broke down after she got down from the bed, she strongly hit the floor with her head.

".....I wish sun perished."

She spat out the curse towards the daylight, which became her daily routine, and headed to the washroom while staggering and smashing against the walls.

When she washed her face, combed her unruly hair and ate breakfast, it was already nine o'clock. She thought of her appointment as she changed into her usual suit.

I'll have to deal with failures first thing in the morning, probably will have to process bits and pieces. Since we don't know what's the cause, there's not much we can do... well, it can't be helped.

Responding to the blackout that happened last weekend, Kiritou formed a countermeasures team immediately which started to deal with problems that appeared in succession.

However, the results were poor. Because of that nearly all of the headquarters' staff planned holidays were called off.

Haya stood in the front door and took a deep breath.

—The moment I step out, I will enter my 'workplace'. That's what she engraved deep in her mind.

"...let's do my best for today."

It was arranged so that Tenryo Taiga would come at two o'clock in the afternoon. Until then, she needs to hurry and clean up the work, it was a pretty tight schedule.

Speaking of which, was he able to convince his little sister?

The other day, it was unknown whether Tenryo Fuyuki will be accompanying him. Although Haya wanted her to come even more so than she wanted Taiga to come, they had their circumstances as well. She didn't intend to insist on it.

That girl, she seems to hate me ¬. No way around it.

As she was going down the building on the elevator, she touched the terminal with her finger. Iora who was supposed to be projected from it—was not there.

Eh? She's not there?

She took a peek inside the terminal, but couldn't find the AI girl in there. Iora wasn't there last night already, but Haya didn't think she wouldn't be back yet. Although Haya wanted to check where she went, she had work to do, so she closed the terminal's window.

Well, she'll be back sooner or later.

Haya convinced herself and headed to the laboratory.

Part 2

The same day, ten o'clock.

"And there... fuh."

A silver haired girl got out from an air-conditioned train and looked at the blue and sunny sky.

"...finally here."

Shio let out a small voice and started dragging a carry-bag she wasn't accustomed to using, and headed to the ticket gate.

What she was wearing at the moment was an outfit she bought after consulting with Rui, a thin black business shirt and shorts. Rather than cute, it was a clothes coordination that could be described as cool.

Her stylish outfit coupled with her originally cool appearance attracted the stares of the passers-by, but she didn't notice it as she focused on carrying her luggage. Since it was a bag equipped with wheels, even the considerably weak Shio could move with it. But since it was filled to the point where it was overflowing and heavy, every time she moved with it, she felt a bodily pain. Shio took a breather after going through the ticket gate.

"Umm... they said they'll pick me up but..."

She looked around the entrance gate through which a violent stream of people leaving for the holidays poured in, searching for her three friends who should have come to pick her up. At the same time she looked at the scenery, in front of her was a brand new city.

"...it really is nice."

Words full of envy left her mouth.

The New City has been developed alongside the Kiritou Group, as the name suggested it was still new. If any extraordinary circumstances were to happen——there was no better city to move to.

It isn't supposed to be a refuge... but that's how it appears to be.

Karasuba wasn't a place for her.

She has been treated like a ghost, it would make no difference whether she was there or not. In order to leave that place, she came to New City.

Shio didn't know yet whether her choice was correct or not. There was both anxiety and hesitation in her mind.

"Ahh, there she is. Heey, Shio-chan!"

Although she was sentimental after arriving at an unknown place, her consciousness returned as a brisk voice sounded in the middle of the crowd. She noticed three people who were walking towards her.

...if I think about that, no wonder I'll be anxious.

She locked away her own hesitation and started pulling her luggage as she walked towards them.

Why has Shio come to New City——to explain the reason for that, we have to trace back in time a little.

Putting aside the results, Taiga has overcome the midterms safely yesterday, which was the first day of the three-day weekend. After that, the four of them went to subdue a powerful virus 《Crom Crouch》 , and after a fierce battle, they won against it. A small uproar happened after that, it happened as they were sitting in the reserved seats in one of the establishments in central city.

"""You want to live alone?!""""

Their surprised voices overlapped.

"I-is it that weird?"

Shio who was drinking a bright red juice panicked seeing the reaction of the three.

Although for her it seemed like a small party and she wanted to chat a bit, what she told them out of the blue left them speechless. Of course, it was a natural reaction.

"...did Karasuba tell you to leave?"

"That's not it, I decided it for myself. I want to leave the house and live elsewhere. From now on, I want to look for a new way to live my life."

Among these words which were truth, there was also a lie.

She didn't have the determination. She just wanted to break through the status quo. Let aside a clear goal, she didn't even have any plans for the future.

Even so, she had to act——because she thought like that, she decided to do it despite hesitating.

"...is that so."

Fuyuki stared at Shio's eyes to check whether what's inside matches her words.

Certainly, for her to live with her family would be mentally stressing, so they agreed on her leaving the house. However, living alone was another thing.

Karasuba Shio was an Ojou-sama. Moreover it was as she had three signs protruding from her head that said 'sheltered girl'.

If she's left alone, she'll get exploited by someone.

I need to do something——Fuyuki was burning with sense of responsibility.

"If you haven't decided where you want to live, I recommend New City."

"That's what I intended to do at the beginning, since everyone lives there. But I couldn't find a vacant room..."

"Ah, that's possible. Since it's a cutting edge and advanced city, there's a lot of people looking for places to stay."

The apartment Tenryo siblings purchased on the top floor was vacant because of a coincidence.

Were it to suddenly turn unavailable, they too would have a hard time finding a room for them. The students flock to the Kiritou dormitories because of similar circumstances.

"Let me ask first, do you have money? It takes a lot to live alone."

"I have plenty. I wasn't always a shut-in."

"No, that's not something you should say while puffing your chest proudly."

"By the way, how much do you have?"

"Umm, this much?"

Shio displayed the data on her savings in a window. Fuyuki looked at the lump of numbers for a few seconds——

"...it seems like we'll have Shii-chan treat us a lot."

"Why?!"

As if she saw something absurd, her pupils displayed shock.

Since she wasn't convinced, Fuyuki started tickling Shio's whole body. Rui who was next to Taiga whispered in secret.

"How much do you think it was?"

"I can't even imagine."

Since Fuyuki who has been earning money as she worked for Karasuba had such a reaction, it must have been a considerable amount. Fuyuki who has always been working hard, and (though it sounds bad) Shio who has always

been a shut-in. It was clear how absurd a difference between the worlds they were born into was.

Finally Fuyuki stopped tickling Shio and returned to the two.

"I-I thought I'd die from laughing..."

"You reap what you sow."

A somewhat refreshed Fuyuki put a hand on her hip and said.

"...for the time being it seems like it's unreasonable to worry about financial issues. But Shii-chan is naive to think she can manage living alone."

"Naive... I don't want to be told that by Hime-chan."

Although what Shio said was correct, but there was also some truth in what Fuyuki said. Rui followed up with a question.

"Cleaning, laundry, cooking. You have to do it all alone right? Can you do that?"

"I investigated it... but I'm anxious."

"Then, let's put it to a test."

"Test?"

"Yes. Whether you're capable of living alone or not, we will perform an examination. If you pass, we won't say anything. But if it fails... Shii-chan will have to give up on living alone until you're capable enough."

The four met up safely and left the central station, first thing they did was to carry out Shio's check-in.

They were worried whether they could find accommodations for her, but since it was a three-day weekend they were able to rent a room in a business hotel without any problems.

In fact, Fuyuki and Taiga said "You can stay in our place for a few days" inviting her, but she refused. Instead, Shio said "I want to stay in a hotel".

After that, the three of them took Shio to many places in the New City. Time passed by very fast, and before long the sun reached its apex.

"Now then, feel free to go in."

"Y-yup. Sorry to intrude."

Somewhat tense, Shio took off her shoes and entered the apartment the Tenryo siblings were living in. Rui followed her while holding ingredients she took from 《Paradise》 .

"So Onii-san and Hime-chan are living in here..."

Fuyuki and Rui put the ingredients in the refrigerator while Taiga prepared coffee. Shio looked around inside. She's never been outside of the Karasuba's premises, so for her to see someone else's home was something new.

Then, she opened one of the rooms curiously and peeked inside.

That's a huge bed... the bedroom? But why are there two pillows... c-can it be that they sleep together?!

She imagined the scene, and her cheeks started to feel hot.

Shio hurried back to the living room, Taiga has already finished pouring coffee and he shook his head seeing her flushed face.

"Did something happen?"

"Ah, no! It's nothing!"

In order to deceive him, she immediately sipped from the cup she received, but since there were no sugar nor milk inside, her face distorted from bitterness.

"What are you doing. Come on, drink this."

"Thank you..."

He passed her the café au lait he made for Fuyuki, she started to sip it. After Fuyuki and Rui came over, the four of them took a break.

Then, Taiga realized Shio's state was weird, she seemed uncomfortable.

Although at first glance it seemed as if she was relaxed as she sat on the sofa, occasionally she made an unnatural gesture with her leg. That movement was awkward too.

Rui also seemed to have noticed it, and she whispered to Taiga in secret.

"...does her leg hurt? Isn't it better if Rui-san made lunch?"

"Indeed. Can you do that?"

"Leave it to me. Fuyuki, I'll prepare lunch, can you help me?"

"Eh? We should be testing Shii-chan today——"

"Leave that for next time. Come on, let's go."

While saying that, Rui took Fuyuki's hand and pulled her to the kitchen. Taiga waited for the two to leave and asked quietly.

"...Shio. You, did you train today?"

"Uu..."

As he pointed it out, she looked away.

She was too fatigued from just walking around for two hours. She must've exhausted herself before coming to New City. When he looked closely, he realized her upper arms and shoulders were trembling, it was probably muscle pain.

"I told you in the beginning. The purpose of it isn't to hurt the body, what's important is to continue training every day and increase the pace every day. First of all you need to increase your stamina."

"I'm sorry... because it was the first time meeting with Onii-san in the real world, I wanted to show you the results of my training..."

She lowered her head slightly and looked up at him from below, her face was pale.

It was unconscious but that gesture stirred the desire to protect in him, Taiga let out a small sigh and knelt in front of her.

"Shio, extend your leg. I'll give you a light massage."

"E-ehh?!"

"It'll be painful for you to walk like this. It should be better if your muscles relax."

He knew too well the discomforts of muscle pain. They couldn't be avoided when one trained their body and it could be painful for those not used to it.

Shio's line of sight was wandering around, it must have still hurt, she slowly held out her light leg to Taiga.

"I'll take off your socks."

"...yes."

He gently took them off.

Her snow white bare foot was revealed, Taiga wrapped it with both of his hands and pressured it with his fingertips.

"Nn...ouch..."

A strange feeling ran through her every time his fingers pressed her feet, and she let out a quiet moan.

"It might be a little bit painful at first, but bear with it. It'll feel good soon enough."

"F-feel good..."

She knew very well she misunderstood it. But because she imagined 'that' kind of act, she hung her head embarrassedly.

Taiga ignored what she said and continued to carefully rub the soles of her feet.

...Shio's feet are really beautiful.

Her skin was silky and smooth.

She must have never ran before. To a point he thought it was impossible, but her feet were incredibly soft. His fingers sank in with a light touch, he felt like wanting to touch it forever.

Naturally, with this massage his body started to heat up.

"Fua... a, kh..."

The pain has been gradually fading, and comfort replaced it.

Warmth spread around her body and the tiredness left her body as if she was soaking in a bathtub, she couldn't focus no longer and started daydreaming.

Ah... this posture...

She looked in front of her, Taiga was kneeling in front of her and he held her foot in his hands.

Somehow Onii-san... he holds it as if I was very fragile...

As she thought that, a feeling went down her spine.

Heat came from her back which melted her reason, and her breathing roughened. But the heat didn't subside.

Hime-chan is sleeping with Onii-san on that bed... they must be in close contact and hugging.

And a sight of the two, one overlapping the other was vividly portrayed in her mind.

—And the fact that a person who would do that kind of thing was servicing her as if she was very brittle, made her irresistibly thrilled.

Fuyuki and Rui who were in the kitchen couldn't see their figures. But what if they were to come back? Surely they would be jealous. They might get angry.

With such a racy situation, and because she was doing it in secret from her best friend, she heated up further.

"Ahh...♪."

She couldn't believe such a bewitching voice came out from her own mouth.

"...please, further up."

"Got it."

According to what Shio said, Taiga slid his fingers towards above her ankles. He carefully rubbed her delicate legs which seemed like they would break with too much force.



"Nn...fue..."

Unconsciously, Shio put the index finger of her light hand into her mouth.

She rummaged in her mouth aroused and mushy, she entwined her tongue around the finger to dissipate the heat.

In the middle of that conduct, 'what to do if Onii-san notices it', her mind was occupied with such a thought; were he to raise his head just a little bit, he would notice that she lost her cool and was unable to think properly.

My head's all mushymushy... it's turning weird...

She couldn't calm the feeling she had for the first time.

I don't care what happens next——just when she thought that, Taiga moved his fingers away. Shio immediately removed the finger from her mouth.

"W-what is it?"

"Hm? I'm finished with the right leg so I though I'd switch."

"Aa, i-is that so... that's good..."

"What's good?"

Suddenly a voice came over from the kitchen, Shio felt as if her heart was going to jump out of her chest.

As she turned around in a hurry, she saw Fuyuki carry plates of sandwiches who gave them a questioning look.

"...what are you doing, you two."

"It seems like she has muscle pain in her legs so I gave her a light massage. Come on, hold out the other leg,"

"Uehh?! I-it's fine already!"

"No, there's no point unless I massage both legs——"

"It doesn't hurt any more! Thank you very much!"

As expected, she didn't have courage to continue this in front of Fuyuki, Shio put on her socks and hurried to the washroom. Fuyuki and Taiga looked at her back and tilted their neck with puzzled expressions at the same time.

"Haa... haaa..."

Shio entered the washroom and repeatedly took big breaths.

Her shame appeared after all this time. Her heart rampaged as if it wanted to crack her ribs, and the face that was reflected in the mirror was red like an apple.

"W-why have I... such a thing..."

The more she tried to remember it, the more her body heated up. Even though she washed her face with cold water, the feeling of her brain melting didn't disappear.

—What was I thinking back then?

She wanted to snatch away her best friend's dear person. She got incredibly excited by such a perverted fantasy. Just by thinking about snatching away someone's precious thing, she couldn't suppress herself——just by imagining it, her heart started beating hard.

"Will he... give me another massage..."

Shio licked her finger and her face reddened further, she splashed it with cold water again after that.

Part 3

After that, the four ate sandwiches prepared by Rui, and spent an hour while relaxing themselves in the Tenryo's home. After that, right before 2 p.m.—

"...it really is an absurdly big building."

What towered in front of Taiga, was a building that seemed big even among the multiple skyscrapers of the New City. The symbol of the city and made by a large company that has developed together with it.

—Kiritou Group's headquarters.

"They might be an emerging group, but they're one of the four major corporations. This is the least they need, otherwise they'd be a joke. Karasuba has several sites of this size."

Fuyuki who was right next to him as he looked up at the building responded. Judging from her tone of voice, she was feeling grumpy, she probably prepared her emotions for the meeting with the girl they were supposed to meet.

"...I didn't think you would come along. Don't you hate Haya?"

"I hate her. But I don't want you and that woman to stay alone together."

She said that she will go together with him after they finished eating lunch.

Although he half-given up after inviting her and getting refused multiple times, she seemed to have a change of mind.

"Since Little Sister has come let's finish it as fast as possible and go back. Both Rucchan and Shii-chan are waiting."

As she said so, she sounded a small bell that was attached to the tip of her sleeve. She changed before leaving home, the clothes she wore were completely different from the ones she had in the morning.

The refreshing sound came from the parka with black and red plaids. The bells were attached around the wrists on the long sleeves, the hood had a

cat ears decoration attached. From between the twenty centimetres mini skirt and high knee-socks peeked the area called 'absolute territory'.

Overall, the coordination made her seem like a cat.

"It's the first time I see these clothes."

"This outfit has been chosen by Rucchan, does it suit me?"

Fuyuki made a twirl in order to show it off. Her figure was lovely and irresistible, so Taiga dodged the issue and averted his eyes.

"I-is it okay to wear that now? You should have left it for a more important occasion."

"No, it's fine to use them now. These are battle clothes after all."

As she stared at him, Taiga drew back a single step. That's when a mechanical sound of an alarm bell set in the terminal rang out. It was time.

"...let's go."

"Yes. Let's quickly finish this up."

The two entered the huge building's first floor, and arrived at the entrance hall.

"——Too slow. You're late, Taiga."

A scolding voice came from the side. They checked the time on reflex, it was only about thirty seconds late from the promised time.

"...can't you overlook a one minute error?"

"Nope. Don't you know the phrase 'time is money'? A guy like you who makes me wait when I'm damn busy like this needs to be punished."

Haya was wearing a suit that as usual, didn't fit her. She got up from a sofa gaining a strong momentum.

There was no one else other than the three of them in the large entrance hall, besides them there were only service drones. Haya's tone was that of

her real self. He wanted to protest against that unreasonable decision of hers, but before he could do that Fuyuki went in front.

"That's quite a bossy attitude from you to someone whom you asked for help, you female fox. At this rate, I might just do an U-turn and go back."

"Oh, you really came. Certainly I asked for you to come, but don't you think coming on time after accepting is an obvious thing to do?"

"Grrr... that wicked backchat of yours is getting on my nerves..."

Easily defeated, Fuyuki glared at Haya with chagrin on her face. However Haya completely ignored it and walked calmly towards the two.

"Since there's no time, let's hurry up and move. I'll explain everything in detail in my room, come."

Fuyuki and Taiga followed right behind her; rather than towards the high-speed elevator that was in the centre of the hall, they got on the cargo elevator that was on the hall's edge, behind the emergency evacuation doors.

"Why not use that elevator?"

"That's because you two are outsiders for the time being. In order not to make it troublesome later on, I chose a route where you won't get caught by security. Or maybe I should have ignored that?"

"...no, I'm thankful."

Fuyuki obediently showed her gratitude.

As someone who escaped from another of the four major companies 'Karasuba'm she didn't want to remain in any footage. That was also one of reasons she was reluctant to come to Kiritou headquarters.

After the elevator rode up to the thirty-third floor, they proceeded down the empty hallway. The entrance hall was the same, there were no signs of life.

"What about other employees?"

"They all log in to the headquarters' structure from their own laboratories. Normally a few dozen of them would be working in the real world, but currently they're too busy to do that because of the defects all over."

"This doesn't seem like the healthiest place to work in..."

"All cyber-related companies seem similar. Karasuba's staff also work inside the structure."

They arrived in her room while chatting.

Haya opened the lock with her terminal and they entered; she sat down on the sofa seemingly tired. Taiga and Fuyuki looked around the room curiously.

"...let me tell you something, checking out a lady's room is rude."

"No, I know that but... I didn't think there would be a private room like this in the headquarters building."

"I feel the same. A refrigerator by the bed, table, kitchen and tableware... there's even a uniform here."

"Well, that's because I live here."

She replied to Taiga's and Fuyuki's question as if it was troublesome.

"The last time I returned home was... six, seven years ago?"

"Seven years, weren't you an elementary-schooler back then?"

"Even if I went back, I would be alone; there's no difference."

The room indeed gave off a feeling that someone lived in it, she must have used it for a long time.

It was more spacious than an average apartment and at the thirty-third floor the view was first class. If one were to overlook the fact there's no partition between the kitchen and living room, one could live comfortably in it.

"What do you do about meals?"

"I cook for myself. I have ingredients delivered every day. Going shopping every day is a hassle... hey, it has nothing to do with this."

bam, she clapped her hands to get the attention of the siblings. She didn't call them here to chat.

"I'll tell you what you are going to do. Especially Fuyuki-san who will be acting alone, make sure you listen."

"Little Sister will be alone?"

"I want you to examine the main server miss. I don't know whether you're aware of it or not, but it's impossible to log in to the main server by using normal means."

"I know that much. On top of it having to be unlocked, one needs to log in to its coordinates directly."

The server machine was installed deep underground and couldn't be accessed physically, it couldn't be accessed from Elysion either. That's why, in order to access it, one had to release two layers of security.

There was a small scale structure that acted as a barrier for the main server. It could be released only from the Kiritou headquarters' structure.

And the second, was phasing into the server itself.

The small-scale structure that acted as its operation panel wasn't connected to the headquarters and couldn't be accessed normally. Even in Kiritou the amount of people who knew its coordinates was limited, it could be entered only by adding its coordinates as a default location in the Arclight.

With these two security methods, the main server has been completely shut out from the outside.

"I know the coordinates of the server. The problem is the electronic barrier, there is no choice but to release it directly from the security room."

"Can't you do it somehow with your privileges as the President's daughter?"

"It's not that easy. That's why I will sneak in and unlock it."

""...ha?""

Hearing these disturbing words that suddenly appeared, the siblings' voices responded in sync.

"...what's with your expressions. You didn't think there was a legitimate way to allow outsiders to access the server, did you?"

"No, I thought you would do something about it with your privileges... rather, isn't that a crime?"

"That's if we get caught. There's no problem as long as we don't."

The siblings were amazed, hearing that logic of hers. Haya hung her head, made a dark smile and cursed.

"Just how much do you think I was inconvenienced by these defects... I could only sleep for thirty minutes yesterday and had to listen to that shitty old man's orders... I'm at my limit..."

It seemed like her thinking simplified as much as it could because of the frustration and fatigue.

In other words 'as long as she can solve it, she won't stop at anything'.

"...well, if I were to go back after coming this far it would be a waste of time and I would be troubled if the damage was spread to 《Aries》 any more than it already has. I'll do it."

"Is it fine?"

"Something like committing a crime never bothered me in the first place."

"...I guess you're right."

When he thought about it, it was certainly true that Fuyuki continued to hack in and access things without authorization on a daily basis, even Taiga did 'such a thing' before. It was too late to mind it.

"So. Haya, specifically what do we do?"

"Firstly, I will dive alone to allow Taiga to move freely. After that, I will go with you to the security room to release the lock. Fuyuki-san will log in to the server room when signalled by us and find the cause of the defects... something like that."

"So Little Sister has to stay on standby for a while."

"I'll send you the coordinates by mail when everything is ready. The headquarters can't tell what's happening in the server room so you can take your time."

"I'll finish it in an hour."

"Ohh, how reliable."

After telling them what their roles were, Haya confirmed the time on the terminal.

2:15 p.m.—If she wasn't wrong, the President should have a regular meeting with executives starting from 2:30 p.m.. Just in case, it would be best to trespass on the main server at that hour.

"All right, I'll go ahead first. Taiga will come in, in fifteen minutes."

There were three Arclights located in the corner of the room——two chair-type medium sized Arclights and one small headgear-type Arclight——she selected a medium-sized machine and immediately started the log-in process to enter the virtual world.

"...then I'll use this one."

Taiga picked up a small machine without hesitation. Then, he saw characters carved in on the medium-sized machine beside him.

AOKO • ASUMI...? Asumi Aoko, that was the name of Haya's friend wasn't it.

He wondered why there would be three Arclights, but it seemed like one of the medium-sized ones belonged to Asumi Aoko. Since a medium-sized Arclight was hard to move, she must have been here very often.

Well, that doesn't matter.

Taiga cleared his thoughts and leaned on the sofa. A small-type Arclight didn't have anything to support the body so he needed to sit on something.

Five minutes later, Taiga closed his eyes and continued to wait for the specified time——that's when he felt a small weight on his knees.

"...Fuyuki?"

"....."

When he opened his eyes he saw Fuyuki sitting on top of his knees and facing him.

"What is it?"

Despite feeling her soft buttocks and thighs, he gently asked under the guise of being calm.

She hesitated for a while, and soon after, she finally began to squeeze the words out.

"...Brother, what do you think about me?"

"What you say——"

"Recently, I think you've been avoiding your little sister... does it mean that because of what happened, you have come to hate her?"

His little sister's eyes started to overflow with tears.

She must have meant the incident at the sea, while Taiga avoided the topic and, as not to stay with her alone, he intentionally made it so there was someone else with them. However, it wasn't because he hated Fuyuki, but because he wouldn't be able to maintain his reason unless he did that. If anything, it was just the opposite from hating her.

But Fuyuki didn't think of it like that. No, it would be too much to ask for her to guess it.

As a result, she started thinking that she has been hated by him because she went out of control back then——a mass of negative emotions has pushed her in a negative direction.

...what am I doing, really.

He was ashamed of making assumptions on his own while in front of his anxious little sister.

That she would be beside him even if he acted firmly and didn't answer to her attempts to get closer—he forced such a convenient delusion on her. He should have known about her insecurity ever since the incident with Shio happened. Although she finally summoned courage and approached him, rather than them getting closer to each other, he had distanced himself from her.

She was more and more insecure, uneasy and anxious, but she still continued to stay beside him without running away.

It's my fault, isn't it.

Fuyuki honestly relayed her feelings to him.

That's why—he had to respond to them properly.

"...sorry."

"Ah..."

He tightly hugged his trembling little sister.

Her small body was soft and warm, a sweet scent spread from her glossy black hair making his heart beat rapidly. Taiga took Fuyuki's hand and put it on his chest.

"My heart, it's beating like mad, isn't it?"

"...yes. *thump* *thump*, it's on a rampage."

In order to feel his heartbeat better, Fuyuki placed her palm on his chest. And as the two were in an even closer contact, his heart started to pound adequately harder.

"...the reason for it to become like that, is you."

"Eh...?"

As she threw him a confused glance, Taiga felt a slight irritation.

Why does this little sister of his who's unusually sharp suddenly become slow when it comes to things like this——he stared straight into Fuyuki's eyes and declared.

"I told you already! That's how it turns out when I'm with you!"

Hearing Taiga's words, her expression froze.

And suddenly, large tears poured from her eyes. Taiga panicked because it was so sudden, he cradled her head and stroked it.



"W-what is it?"

"Uu....ah, that's... I'm so happy..."

She continued to cry like a child. She was so very happy she couldn't help it——directly hit by those emotions, she rested her head on his chest.

"Finally... my feelings reached Onii..."

Fuyuki grasped Taiga's head with both of her hands and turned his head towards her, and her face approached him.

There was no reason for him to refuse it.

Their lips touched lightly.

It happened only for a second at most. Fuyuki immediately moved her face away and stared at Taiga before she overlapped his lips with his once again. This time it was a passionate kiss during which they were taking turns to breathe.

"Nn...chu...fua...ammu..."

They were engrossed in seeking each other out.

They didn't stop, they didn't even think of stopping.

Only wanting to convey the passion in their hearts to the other——they repeatedly kissed while thinking of that.

"Oniii... I lub you..."

There were five more minutes left until the time specified by Haya came, their lips didn't leave each other until then.

Part 4

Meanwhile, Rui and Shio who parted from the Tenryo siblings were inside of a shop located in a corner of New City.

"Shio-chan, how about that table? The price is reasonable and the design is pretty nice?"

Shio put a hand on her chin and looked at the antique table Rui recommended from various angles. She couldn't tell if the price was good since she didn't know the market, but she thought that a wooden furniture wasn't bad.

"...yes. I think it's good."

"Okay, then I'll add it to the list—"

Rui took a photo of the table and its price, she also entered the name of shop into file. There were some goods already marked on the memo; after looking around the store they found the table, they left it.

"We've steadily decided on the potential furnishings."

"It's all thanks to Rui-chan's assistance, I wouldn't be able to choose it alone."

For her who had no knowledge whatsoever, the idea of 'choosing the furniture' didn't even appear in her mind. While she was grateful to Rui for mentioning it, she was also apologetic.

...I don't really need to decide on anything by myself, do I.

Even though she said she will live alone, she couldn't do anything on her own. Just because she wanted to run away from her family she troubled her friends——she hated herself for that.

"You've been making a difficult expression for a while now, are you worried about something?"

Rui asked her that when they sat down on a bench in the park to take a break. Shio touched her face and asked timidly.

"...so I made such an expression."

"Yup. If you want you can consult with Rui-san?"

She put on a friendly smile as she said that. Somewhat enveloped in that smile, Shio confessed what was troubling her.

"...I see. You don't know whether you made the right decision or not, you don't have confidence."

"In the end, I'm just running away again... I don't have any reason to live alone aside from wanting to distance myself from my family..."

That was what made her hesitate.

Despite wanting to take a step forward, her leg was clinging to the past, it was an emotion which resembled mud.

"——Then why don't you find a more positive reason."

Rui easily cut off the chains that were binding her.

"Running away, fleeing, those kinds of words cause negative image and feelings. What about... Shio-chan, you were looking for a house in New City, right?"

"Y-yes. Being together with everyone is fun after all..."

"Then just make that your reason. Whether its Fuyuki or Taiga, whoever. 'Wanting to be together with'. Isn't that a very positive thing?"

"...but."



"Also, it's just Rui-san's selfish opinion, but I think running away is not such a bad thing. As long as you find something after running away, I think it's a great thing to do."

Running away is all right——Rui's words lodged themselves in Shio's chest.

It wasn't that her hesitation disappeared. Rui just showed her a different point of view. But that gave her the courage to take a step ahead.

"...thank you, Rui-chan."

"You're welcome. ——Well then! Now that you've decided it yourself, you need to overcome the test to convince Fuyuki. Let's go back and do special training!"

"S-special training?"

"Even if the test doesn't happen, you still need to get better at housework. Now, lezzgo~!"

"A-awawa..."

The two girls started to make a commotion and disappeared in the crowd.

Part 5

"...now then, with this the electronic barrier has been dealt with."

Inside of Elysion, in a corner of Kiritou headquarters' structure.

Haya managed to sneak into the security room and tamper with the settings there. She raised her head up, Taiga who was watching whether anyone was coming finally loosened his shoulders.

"Finally... it took a while."

"Well, it is a barrier protecting the server room. Releasing it is a complex process in itself. Rather, isn't it your fault for coming late? What were you doing?"

As Haya stared at him, Taiga unconsciously raised a hand to his lips. Because he was kissing like crazy with Fuyuki he forgot about the time, but he couldn't say that.

"...well, that's fine. Let's hurry and get out. Even if all the employees are busy, there's no guarantee that nobody will come."

Normally there would be employees in the security room, and even Haya wouldn't be able to move freely in there. But now that they were all pressured to deal with a huge number of bugs that appeared frequently, even the minimum amount of people assigned to it have been relocated. Thanks to that, they were able to sneak in.

"Even so... those clothes of yours, they seem weird no matter how many times I see them."

"Sorry about that. They don't suit me anyway."

Taiga grumbled disgruntled, he was wearing a black formal suit. Even though he had a neatly tied necktie, he didn't look like an employee.

"Ara, I didn't say they don't suit you? I'm just used to seeing you in school uniform. It just feels like it's overdoing it."

"So you're making fun of me after all."

"Could you stop pouting? I explained already why you need a suit."

Even if he was with Haya, he couldn't just walk around in the Kiritou Structure while wearing plain clothes.

And so, he used a suit's data to dress himself, he couldn't get used to this type of clothing. He felt restless and didn't want to wear them for too long.

"Lets go then. Until Imouto-san finished her work I'm going to have you work your ass off as well."

"Hey hey..."

They contacted Fuyuki after taking down the barrier and sent her the server coordinates and left the security room at a brisk pace. Thanks to Taiga sensing people around, they were able to leave without bumping into anyone.

In order to return to the top, instead of using an elevator, they headed to a transfer circle (A point that allowed transferring. A huge stream of people appeared and disappeared from there able to transition indefinitely). They passed by dozens of staff in the meantime, it was full of people unlike the headquarters building in the real world. It seemed to be true that all the staff were logged into the structure.

By the way, since she was in front of people, Haya turned into her façade-mode.

"Even though it was so quiet in the real world."

"That's because all the staff are logged in. The only thing in the real world that moves are the reception drones."

"And what about the people who are visiting?"

"They are being connected to the support that's in here. Logging out for every visitor would be a hassle."

"That's being lazy."

"All cyber-related companies are like that, you know? A researcher wouldn't log out every time someone wants to ask them a few questions."

"It's a miracle their physique doesn't break down... ah, I see. Medium-sized Arclights come with supporting functions don't they."

In addition to life support functions, medium-sized machines came with a few other ones as well.

Thanks to that people were able to stay logged in for a week. That said though, there were cases of people dying due to debilitation because of diving in cyber world for too long.

They arrived at the transfer point as they talked.

"...eh? Aren't we going back?"

"No, there's a limit to how much we can do in there. We're going to work in another room."

Although Taiga thought they will go back to the login point at the thirty-third floor, Haya set the transfer location to the thirty-fourth floor. Since there were thirty-five floors in total, it was one floor below the top.

"...oh, right. Iora, it's about time you came back. Come out."

Just before starting the transfer, Haya called out to the empty space behind her.

Responding to her voice, Iora appeared with a phosphorescent light and bowed. Seeing that gesture made Taiga feel somewhat uncomfortable.

⟨"Is there anything, Master?"⟩

"Don't 'is there anything' me. Why haven't you shown yourself up until now?"

⟨"I was in a different structure."⟩

"Geez... did I let you roam a bit too freely?"

Haya sighed and started the transfer circle, moving to a floor about sixty metres away was instantaneous in the virtual reality. It seemed like there weren't any labs on the floor they entered, there were almost no people in the hallway. As they looked, they could only see men and women in suits walk towards them from the front.

Then, Haya's movement stopped.

Seeing her suddenly stop, Taiga followed her line of sight. Rather than at the men and women in front, she looked at the man between them. Even Taiga knew that man.

...Kiritou Kouya.

The leader of the Kiritou Group, Haya's father.

He saw the photo of the school's founder, but the real thing had a really cold look in his eyes. The woman beside him must have been his secretary. They must have noticed them because the woman whispered to Kiritou Kouya.

Kouya looked up and his gaze met with Haya's.

"...so you still haven't disposed of that junk."

The one who spoke first was Kouya. He looked towards Iora who was floating above Haya's shoulder.

"I've told you before. You should dispose something as useless as an AI right away."

"...I apologize Father. I cannot obey that command."

With a voice as sharp and cold as ice, Haya responded quietly.

"You should also have understood the rarity of this AI • Iolite. As long as it's kept in storage it will definitely be useful in the fut——"

"There is no need for that. There's nothing we can obtain from that AI."

He cut in in the middle of Haya's sentence as if it was not worth listening to. As Haya tried to refute, the secretary broke in between them.

"President, it's almost time for the regular meeting. Please hurry."

"Got it."

Kouya responded shortly and passed by Haya as if it was a waste of time to talk with her. He glanced at Taiga who stood behind for a moment, but soon after he lost interest and disappeared after entering the transfer circle.

The hallway turned silent once again.

Taiga couldn't find any words to say, and just stared at Haya silently. About ten seconds later, Haya formed a fist and hit the wall with all her strength, she made a small sigh.

"...let's go, Taiga-kun."

As she looked up, she had still the same meek smile. No, it wasn't the same at all.

Although she had the mask of a yamato nadeshiko on her face, recently he became able to peek through the mask at her 'true self'. But he couldn't even imagine what kind of emotions she felt at the moment.

A perfect daughter of the President——her current appearance was the embodiment of these words.

"The room in that corner. Please follow me."

"...okay."

He followed Haya whose emotionless smile disappeared and entered the room.

The room was silent, the only thing that sounded inside were electronic sounds as the data passed through.

The two continued to work wordlessly. It was an incredible amount of work for them to fix the data that was falling apart, they proceeded at high speed.

"...all right, with this it's done——"

"I'm done over here."

Taiga took a step towards her and passed the data to her, Haya let out a voice impressed.

"I already thought so earlier when you helped me out, but your dynamic vision and reflexes are outstanding. You're really suited to simple tasks like these."

"Is that... any good?"

Fifteen minutes after they started working, the room that was originally flooded with crystals was cleaned up. Although there were three of them (Iora didn't say anything and just continued to work in silence), he was wondering if there was any real meaning for him to tidy it up.

"...hey Taiga. You're living alone with your little sister, aren't you?"

Unexpectedly, Haya asked him such a thing. He didn't know what she intended by asking such a question, but he responded and asked.

"That's right, what about it?"

"How are your relationships with your family?"

Hearing that answer, he finally understood what was her intent. It was caused by what happened earlier with Kiritou Kouya.

"Really, you. You shouldn't get too involved with the people you use.."

"Thank you for the concern. But you don't need to bother with it. So, how is it?"

"...they both died eight years ago."

Since there was nothing in particular to hide, he honestly answered.

"...is that so. I asked something bad."

"I don't really mind. It's something that happened when I was a kid. What about you? From what I saw, it doesn't seem like you're getting along too well."

"It's in a completely dimension from what you would call 'not getting along'."

Haya let out a sigh and turned to look towards the ceiling. Taiga had no idea how to call the emotions that were dwelling in her pupils.

"Although we're undoubtedly blood-related, I never thought of him as my father. He doesn't see me as his daughter either."

"...you hate each other a lot."

"If you put it in terms of love or hate, then you're without a doubt right. But that's not a proper representation. If I were to put it in words... our existences are incompatible, or something like that."

Personality, thinking, principles, objectives, behaviour——each and every one of these factors were different between Kiritou Haya and Kiritou Kouya, it was like heaven and earth. Or that's at least what Haya thought. Were she to be told that she's an adopted daughter, it would make more sense.

"Your mother?"

"She died soon after giving birth to me. That's why I never felt anything like being appreciated by the family. Honestly, I'm jealous of your and your little sister's relationship. For someone to believe another person so unconditionally is amazing."

When she spoke about his relationship with Fuyuki, his heart skipped a beat, but he immediately noticed it wasn't said in 'that' sense and was relieved. At the same time, he was shocked.

"You thought something like that? Can it be that you being on bad terms with Fuyuki is because..."

"You're half correct. The other half is just because I don't like her."

Kiritou Haya was always alone.

She didn't have any family beside her, in order to acquire proper education and to act with a lady's dignity, she spent every day being strictly tutored. She didn't make any friends even after entering the school. In this sense, she and Fuyuki might resemble each other. And yet——

"Imouto-san has you. You're tied by ties stronger than anything else in the world. I might be a little jealous of that... but since it's pathetic I don't want to admit it."

"...but even you had a best friend, haven't you?"

"That might be right but... even so, the grass is always greener on the other side."

Yeah, this girl was yearning for family——that's what Taiga thought. Precisely because it was an illusion which wouldn't come true, she couldn't help but embrace the unobtainable dream.

"...hey, what kind of person was Asumi Aoko?"

"What's with that sudden question?"

"I'm curious what kind of person would be friends with a someone as obstinate as you."

"...that's a really annoying way to say it... oh well. I'll tell you since we're taking a break anyway."

While saying that, Haya held out a single window.

It was the photo Taiga previously peeped on in the school's classroom. On it, there were two girls wearing the Kiritou Academy's uniforms. One of them was Haya, the other was a female student with long bluish-black hair.

"That's Aoko. She was the same age as me, a researcher that used to be a member of Kiritou."

"She looks just like Iora."

"It's the opposite, it's Iora who looks like Aoko."

The two on the photo were linking arms and laughing, there was a cherry tree behind them. He thought it must have been from the entrance ceremony.

"Even though you asked me what kind of person she was... I can't easily explain it. But there's one thing I can say for sure, she was a genius."

"Genius, huh."

It was a word Taiga heard often. But since Haya already knew Fuyuki, the weight of her words was different.

"If you're saying that, then she must've been incredible."

"Yeah. At the very least I couldn't even reach the level of her feet. Although I said we were developing Iora together, she's been actually developed almost single-handedly by Aoko."

"Really?"

"I was responsible for things like debugging. Aoko was not good with things like that. You know the people who devote themselves completely to something, and yet they aren't interested at all in others. She was an exemplary representative of that kind, I had a hard time being with her."

"...but you look happy as you talk about it."

Although she complained about it, she couldn't hide a smile blooming on her face. It was different from how it was when she talked with Taiga and Fuyuki, those were sincere emotions.

"...well, there was lots of stuff happening but it was fun."

Her expression clouded over for a moment as she said 'lots of stuff', Taiga didn't miss it. It seemed like it wasn't just happy memories.

"Now then, let's go proceed to the next room."

Haya stood up as if signalling the end of the story.

And Taiga who thought he was finally done with helping out asked with a disgruntled voice.

"...there's still more?"

"Of course. At the very least, I'll have you help me out until Fuyuki-san finds the cause of the problem. Although she said she'll finish in an hour... well, my estimate is that she'll need at least three hours."

"You serious..."

Not even twenty minutes have passed since they sent Fuyuki coordinates of the server room. Were she to finish it in three hours, the day would be already over.

I guess we'll have to give up on rejoining Rui and Shio.

Taiga opened a window with mail software. He wrote a mail addressed to Rui and Shio saying 'see you tomorrow' and—

"Eh?"

With a sound of glass breaking, sending was cancelled. The text written in the window said 〈Sending failed〉 .

He tried again but the result didn't change. The two words indicating failure to send were all that was displayed. Even when he changed the destination to Fuyuki there was no difference.

"...did it break?"

It might have been broken were it to be the real world, but this was the virtual world. There is no such thing as equipment 'breaking' in it.

"What is it Taiga?"

"No, I tried to send a mail but it didn't go through... sorry but can you send one for me?"

"It can't be helped——hey, I can't do it either. Maybe the line's crowded. Log out and try sending it from the real world."

"Got it."

He did as she said and activated the logout process.

The process for disconnecting the mental structure from the virtual world progressed——and with a sound of glass breaking, it was cancelled.

"...hey hey."

He muttered stunned by the fact that even that failed.

——Wait.

That moment, his intuition warned him.

He experienced such a situation once before. That was when he rushed to where Fuyuki and Shio were when they faced 《Angel》 ——

"-----"

shh, his thinking cooled down.

It was different. That was nothing like the line being crowded. They couldn't contact the outside——knowing that fact, cold sweat started flowing down his back.

"Haya, can we transition to another structure from here?"

"A different structure? You can do it if you go to a transfer point that supports it."

"All right, let's go right now."

"Haa? Why?"

"Explanations later. Hurry up. If we don't hurry, it'll be too late——"

⟨"—That's pointless. This place is already under my control. You won't escape that easily."⟩

"....."

What sounded in his ears, was an unforgettable voice.

It was impossible. It couldn't be. The virtual body cloaked in white robes wasn't there, there was only a small AI clad in pale light——

⟨"Preparations are complete... with this no one can stop me."⟩

What entered Taiga's field of vision after he turned around was AI • Iolite who had a smile unlike her on her face. Her appearance distorted and expanded, with her form intact she increased her size several times.

"I really can't get used to a small body. It's hard to move in it. Although this is a body I made, I should have thought more about the convenience of using it."

In an instant Iora increased in size and became as big as Taiga and Haya—the virtual body was usually covered with a white robe, 《Angel》rotated its shoulder lightly.

...calm down. If you get upset you'll make it more convenient for the enemy.



As not to agitate the 'enemy', Taiga quickly confirmed the situation they were in.

The exit from the room was behind Angel, they needed to pass by him in order to get out.

As to not let Angel hear it, Taiga whispered to Haya... and noticed an abnormality.

"I'll make an opening. Use it to run outside——Haya?"

"...that... voice... no way... but... it can't be, she's supposed to be——"

It wasn't just her voice that was trembling. Her entire body was trembling as if she saw something that shouldn't exist; witnessed something that shouldn't have been.

Her appearance being the same was obvious, that's how Iora was. But that voice, that voice which made people think she was making fun of them was just like hers.

"...oh right. I haven't greeted you yet."

Seeing Haya like that, Angel made a faint smile.

"It's the second time we meet, Tenryo Taiga. And——it's been a while, Haya. Looks like you remember me, I'm glad."

"——Aoko!"

Angel——no, the girl who was supposed to be dead. Asumi Aoko stood in front of the two with an innocent smile on her face.

Chapter 4 - Banquet of The Dead

Part 1

"...where is this place?"

Seeing reality skewed from what it should be, Fuyuki raised a puzzled voice.

In front of her was spread an empty and white space. The perspective deviation came from that one colour that was spread in every direction.

That's weird. Did I mistype the coordinates?

She properly set the login coordinates according to the ones she has been given in a mail from Haya. The electronic barrier was released according to the plan, she should have penetrated the server room. However, no matter how she looked at it, it was a different location from the one she wanted to enter.

She couldn't think of anything else other than mistyping coordinates.

I was too happy and became careless.

Normally Fuyuki would never made such a mistake. But because she was spending her sweet time earlier her head was all mushy and simmering. It must have been because of the afterglow after that.

She tried to get herself into shape by slapping her both cheeks. Even if it was a request from someone she didn't like, once she accepts it she would finish it properly. Her pride is on the line when it came to completing it——despite that, the smile on her face wouldn't disappear.

...after we go back let's do it again. Until then I need bear it.

She reminded herself to stay in focus.

What would that female fox say were she to fail. After imagining that scene her thinking gradually changed.

In any case, she needs to enter the server room first. She needed to log out and check it once again——the moment she tried starting the logout process a red crystal stuck into the window and forcibly stopped the process.

"How cold. Even though I went through so much trouble to invite you, you're going back already?"

Hearing a voice sound from behind at the same time, Fuyuki turned around to look towards the source.

"Well, I won't let you go."

How long has it been there. Five metres away from her stood a virtual body clad in a white robe. She couldn't forget it, the cursed enemy who used Shio before.

"...why are you here 《Angel》 ."

"Didn't I tell you just now? I invited you here."

Invited——she repeated that word thinking about the meaning. It was obvious that this wasn't the server room. And if the coordinates she typed in were correct, there was one possibility to consider.

"...you've hacked the Arclight and rewritten the coordinates Little Sister entered haven't you."

"Correct. It's a great help that you understood it this fast."

What's up with the 'correct'. That's crazy.

She started swearing in her mind.

Hacking an Arclight. Rather than whether it was possible or impossible, the difficulty level was immeasurably high. It was on a level that would make it hard even for Fuyuki. Furthermore, judging by the fact she was unable to log out, there must have been a barrier spread around the space.

But no matter how much she thought, she couldn't find the reason for what was happening.

"What's your purpose. You haven't come here to chat, have you?"

"Chatting huh. That might have been nice."

Angel's easy going attitude was undisturbed. And since it didn't show any gestures at all, it made it seem like it really didn't come just to talk. That appearance further deepened her suspicions.

There was no way it had no purpose. To rewrite the coordinates the moment Fuyuki was about to dive would be impossible unless it was watching her movements. For it to go that far to confine her, there had to be a reason——

...locked... in?

It was different from that. Completely different.

It was not that it didn't have a purpose, it has achieved it already. Trapping Tenryo Fuyuki in this space, that was 《Angel》's purpose. In other words——to stall her!

"...!!"

"I won't let you."

Something was happening on the other side. Brother was in danger——she immediately determined herself and attempted to break through the barrier but the window was destroyed by a red crystal thrown by Angel.

"It would be troublesome were you to get out. Sorry, but I'll have you play with me in this 《Prison》 I prepared."

"...you're not the 《Angel》 himself are you. You're an autonomously operating program right?"

"Hee. You've already seen through it... you are dangerous after all."

Fuyuki managed to see through the identity of Angel who was in front of her.

A program planted with the routine thinking of its author, a program acting according to its author's personality. It must've been prepared in order to stall Fuyuki. It looked like 《Angel》 was preparing something really dangerous.

"I'll say it only once. If you don't want to be scrapped disappear at once."

"That's something I can't agree with. If you want to go to where Tenryo Taiga is——try eliminating me with all your strength first!"

Fuyuki and 《Angel》 opened windows at the same time, blue and red crystals clashed.

Part 2

"——It's been a while, Haya. Looks like you remember me, I'm glad."

"——Aoko!"

Haya spoke the name of the girl who no longer existed.

She couldn't be alive. She died from an illness a year ago without a doubt. Haya gave her a proper burial. There was no way the girl in front of her was 'Asumi Aoko'.

But Haya was convinced with just a glance. The person in front of her was Asumi Aoko.

".....why."

"'Why are you alive' is a pointless question so stop that would you? As you already know, the person called Asumi Aoko is already dead. That's the reality which won't change."

Dumbfounded,

Haya stared at 《Angel》 ——Asumi Aoko who informed her with a smile.

It was no different from when she was alive, a beautiful smile.

But for some reason, her smile which should have felt nostalgic caused her to feel mysterious fear.

"Making such a face when facing your best friend, that makes even me hurt."

"...you must be joking. If you're the Aoko I know, then you won't be shaken by this much. Rather, you would rather be enjoying the sight of me being taken aback."

"Undoubtedly."

Aoko let out a happy laughter. Haya looked vigilantly at her female friend and asked.

"——What are you?"

"...that way of speaking, looks like you have an idea... well that's obvious. You were at my side as I did my research."

"....."

Indeed, Haya knew already.

A way for someone who died to remain in this world, Asumi Aoko knew more about it than anyone else.

That's why that possibility appeared in her head before. It appeared, but she didn't think about it much. I'll never use it——that's what she promised her.

"Aoko... you, do you know what have you done?! You crossed the line that should've never been crossed! That's——"

"I know. Even I know that this is wrong."

She cut in the middle of Haya speaking, showing her determination.

"But this is what I have chosen. The Kiritou, I will destroy this silly little world. I'll do anything to accomplish that."

"...destroy the Kiritou? What are you——"

"You might be confused, but I have no time for idle talk. It's about time I started."

Along with that declaration, she made a dry sound by snapping her fingers. It was a signal.

【"Total System Control of Structure 《Kiritou Headquarters Building》 Complete."】

【"Firewall disabled. Limited connection with different structures re-established."】

【"Transferring virus program 《Zygote》 , starting virtual bodies elimination."】

Together with that voice, the walls, the floor, and the doors started shaking.

Vibrations were emitted from all directions of the thirty-fourth floor and spread to the entire structure in a blink of an eye, producing countless black holes. It was also happening to the room Taiga and Haya were currently in, the black stains appeared to the left and right of Aoko and started to slowly expand.

"What did you do?!"

"Whaat, I just thought of turning this place into a little hell. You'll know soon enough... rather than that, Tenryo Taiga. You've been glaring at me for a while now, got anything to say."

Aoko looked towards Taiga.

For a while now he was unable to understand what was happening—but there was only one thing he had to confirm.

"Angel, no, Asumi Aoko was it. What have you done with Iora?"

"Iora? Oh, the virtual personality that was in this body. She was swallowed by me and disappeared. She's been resisting until the very end but it was a waste of effort."

"...I see."

In Taiga's mind the conversation he had with Iora at night was revived.

Maybe she was able to feel Aoko's presence. That's why she said something like 'were something to happen'.

"I need to keep my promise."

Taiga took a step ahead and loudly stretched himself.

"H-hey Taiga?!"

"Haya, we'll talk later. We need to stop her before it's too late."

He instructed the still-confused Haya.

He was already convinced.

The sixth sense that allowed him to avoid death thousands, tens of thousands times told him——this girl has stepped into a wrong road. If he doesn't stop her, it'll be irreparable.

As Taiga looked straight ahead at her, Aoko laughed fearlessly.

"Stop me? Unfortunately, it's impossible for you guys. Elysion is my home ground. The only risk factor which was Tenryo Fuyuki has been rendered powerless. You have no way of stopping me."

"...you bitch. What did you do to her?"

"I confined her for a while. What, I don't intend to harm her. I'll release her when it's over."

Hearing Fuyuki's name Taiga released murderous intent from his entire body.

But even in front of intent an ordinary person wouldn't be able to stand, Angel still smiled relaxedly.

"Scary scary. You're too scary... I need to call a bodyguard."

tap, Aoko lightly hit the floor with her foot.

The black stain on the floor took a three-dimensional shape and started to expand. Taiga has seen that before, he lowered his body in order to protect Haya.

As expected, it changed into a jet-black knight——《Zygote》. Moreover, there were two of them. They were already enhanced by several stages.

"This thing again..."

"Nostalgic isn't it? I have reviewed what happened during the case with Karasuba Shio, a low fighting capability won't stop you. That's why I allowed them to grow beforehand. Oh, even if you destroy it no one will get hurt because of it so you don't have to worry... well, that's if you can destroy them!"

With her voice as a signal the 《Zygote》 began their assault with a powerful charge.

Taiga reflexively put a hand on his hip, but there were no weapon there.

"....!! Damn!"

He immediately switched to barehanded techniques and sent the black knight flying.

He forgot. It wasn't 《Aries》 but the Kiritou Headquarters' structure. Attack-configured programs were made specifically for 《Aries》 so he couldn't use it.

The black knight was blown away and hit the wall with a strong impact. But despite having power that should be enough to crush the armour, it didn't even have a scratch and rose up instantly.

"Get back Taiga! The enemy is a virus, without an attack-configured program you won't damage it!"

"Even so, there's nowhere to run!"

Taiga responded to her while avoiding slashes from the two enemies. The doorway was on the other side, behind the black knights. It was impossible for them to pass.

Although he concentrated on avoiding, it was a small room that didn't give him much room to do so. Together with Haya they were gradually cornered against a wall.

"...now then, excuse me but I'll be leaving."

Aoko silently watched as the two were gradually cornered and opened a window, her body has gradually disappeared. She was using 《Transition》 to move somewhere. Haya immediately broke out and started to run towards her.

"Wait! Aoko!"

"Idiot don't go in front!"

Haya didn't look around at all, she tried to run in a straight line to Aoko. The black knight wouldn't miss such a defenceless target, a large hatchet was swung at her head.

"Hey——you retard!"

Taiga managed to push her down in the nick of time, the hatchet passed through empty space. Haya still tried to reach out desperately.

"Aoko! Aoko——!!"

"I'm going to the top floor. If you there is something, come up there and tell me there."

Aoko left behind these words with a cold look in her eyes before she dispersed like fog and disappeared. Haya's outstretched arms fell down powerlessly.

But it was not the time to immerse in sentiments. Her body was nearly bisected by a huge hatchet, Taiga embraced Haya and jumped back at full power making distance from the knights.

"——!! What are you doing Taiga, we need to chase after Aoko!"

"Don't be so reckless."

Although Haya pulled his collar and commanded him, doing what she said would be too reckless.

There was no opening between the two Zygotes. They didn't allow him to rest by attacking in turns, chasing after Aoko would be unreasonable like this. They were cornered little by little.

Fuck, at this rate we'll be done for...!

He picked up Haya to carry her, leaving her behind was out of question. Were he to break through—he needed to risk a little.

Without any hesitation Taiga lowered his hips and flung her into the air.

"Wha——!!"

He ignored Haya who raised a complaint while in mid-air and momentarily closed the distance that separated him and the black knights.

While the Zygotes were distracted by the defenceless Haya for a moment Taiga delivered a blow with his fists to the belly of one of them, he took a half a step further after that and pounded the knight into the ground. After that he turned his body while maintaining the momentum and while dodging a slash at the same time he delivered a roundhouse kick to the second knight's neck.

The two black knights were blown away. Taiga immediately started to run and gently caught the falling Haya.

"...that's quite an outrageous way of doing things."

"Emergency measures. Let's hurry up and go!"

He didn't destroy them, the black knights will chase after him soon enough. The two hurried towards the exit of the room——and seeing the sight spread out in front of them they were at a loss for words.

".....what's... this."

—— I just thought of turning this place into a little hell. ——

Aoko's words were the truth.

If there were anything that could be called hell, then it would be this scene. The walls were stained with vivid red, blood-like colour.

About ten Zygotes were lined up in the hallway, under their feet there were numerous researchers thrown as if they were garbage.

The large hatchet that rose up from the researcher's body was clad in blood-like a aura.

—— 『Jail』 . The military program allowing to capture the mental structure, which was the human soul.

It has caused more than a dozen of people including Rui to fall into a coma before, it was something that Aoko originally researched and developed. It wasn't weird for her to have it. However——the spectacle of several hundred people falling to it was way too unrealistic.

"...tell me this is a joke..."

In response to Haya's groan, the dozen of black knights have turned their gaze towards the two. Moreover, the two that fell down earlier got up and were behind them.

They had no way out. Fortunately, Taiga knew how to resist them.

He closed his eyes to calm his mind and took the pale Haya's hand.

"Let's escape for now."

"W-where to! Every floor must be flooded with these guys!"

"A place we can hide in. Aren't you living in here?"

He put some strength in the hand that grasped her wrist and stared in her eyes that seemed to lose her will to resist; relaying 'calm down' with his line of sight. Haya let out a sigh.

"...in the back of third floor there's a secret room I made when I was a child. We can hide in there."

Even though she tried to act calmly, her body was lightly trembling. She was still in high school, it was hard for her to resist panicking while facing such a hell.

"All right. Let's go there. The transfer circle... can't be used can it."

Were he to be the invader, the first thing he would do is to seal their mobility. Since Aoko took control of this place and was able to use 『Transition』, that meant they had no choice but to move on her own two feet.

If I remember well, there were stairs. Looks like we need to use them.

He dug in his memory and envisioned a map in his head. Since it was a considerable distance and they had to pass through an open area, they had no choice but to break through forcibly.

"Sorry Haya, but bear with it for a while."

"Eh? ...kyaa!!?"

Taiga encompassed Haya's waist with his left arm and strongly embraced her. Strength easily left her body and she left it to him, taking a posture where she burried her face in his neck.

"H-hey?! What are you doing at a time like——!"

"I'm going to run at full speed. Cling to me as if your life depends on it."

Ignoring Haya's protests Taiga quietly lowered his hip.

The moment a hatchet was swung at them from behind, Taiga burst out at top speed.

Haya was surprised by the sudden acceleration and involuntarily she held onto him with both of her arms with all her strength. Taiga dodged the Zygotes' attacks with as little movements as possible and continued to run through the hallway!

"W-wait Taiga! This is harder than expect——"

"Shut up, you'll bite your tongue!"

Although Haya complained about the speed that made her feel like she'll be shaken off, but he ignored it all.

Were they to drop the speed even a little they would be caught. If a black knight equipped with 『Jail』 hit them with its hatchet, it would be a fatal wound.

He paid attention to what happened both in front and in the back.

Since he didn't defeat the 『Zygotes』 they of course chased after them, Since they were enhanced by several stages their physical abilities were rivaling that of Taiga's. He had to predict their attacks, otherwise they would be struck down.

He sprinted down the hallway at an incredible speed. However, the enemy wasn't a disorderly mob. Reinforcements used the stairs and come from both above and below. With that they could no longer use the stairs.

"Tch...!"

There was no time to hesitate. Taiga prepared himself.

"Haya! We'll be going down to the third floor all at once, close your eyes!"

"Wa-wait a second! You can't mean——"

He released the hand supporting Haya just for a moment and kicked off the floor with all his strength.

There was a single Zygote in front of them. Taiga released a blow with his fist to its belly and jumped on top of it.

After hanging in the air for a moment their momentum was lost and the 2 people + 1 virus started falling and accelerating; drawn to the ground by gravity!

"KYAAAAAAAAAAA!"

Because of the deafening scream Taiga's eardrums were shaken as he was in contact with the source, but he couldn't afford to concern himself with it.

Need to concentrate on my vision... If I miss the timing it'll be all over.

The scenery he was seeing flowed at high speed. He kicked off his foothold right before reaching the third floor jumping into the hallway.

Immediately after he rolled on the ground, he heard a sound of something crashing into the bottom.

"...good, success."

"What success! I thought I'd die!"

Haya hit Taiga with her right hand, a loud sound of a slap rang out.

Certainly, a free fall from the thirty-fourth floor was a scary thing even in the virtual world.

"Stop complaining, we escaped unscathed. Rather than that, let's hurry and hide. They'll come down to chase us."

"...fine, this way."

Guided by Haya, Taiga ran through the corridor filled with a huge amount of virtual bodies on the ground.

Part 3

It happened during the winter six years ago.

The two girls still haven't known each others names, it was the second day after the fateful encounter.

In a hotel located in a certain remote city the twelve year old Kiritou Haya was lazing around.

"...what am I doing, really."

She's been rolling around on a bed for nearly an hour, and then she suddenly muttered.

Were she to be asked why was she doing that, she would answer 'because I have free time', but she still could use this time for something productive.

"...even so, what should I do?"

For now she stood up and stared at her blank schedule.

She had nothing she could call a hobby, after her everyday lessons she just went to rest. In other words, she had nothing to do. After such a lifestyle continued for two days in a row, Haya let out a long sigh.

Haya was accompanying her father.

The reason she had arrived at this city could be described with those words. Also, the reason she remained in the city even after the party was over, was also her father.

Staying in here for two days because of work problems is fine, but there's no reason for me to stay as well is there.

She complained in her mind only. There was no way she would ever act in such a manner openly—in her short twelve-year long life she had already remembered the rules of acting in society.

And thus, the girl with too much time hid the fact that she was bored.

Oh right, I wonder what happened with the thief from yesterday.

On top of the desk beside the bed lied and shined her favourite bracelet. The metal part was a little dirty, reminding her that what happened the day before wasn't a dream.

—Speaking of how it concluded, Haya let the thief girl go in the end.

She thought that the hungry girl was quite miserable and she herself didn't want to be questioned by the police. Were that to happen her and father would need to leave the party venue, it might have damaged Kiritou's good name. There were only disadvantages to it.

"Let's take a stroll."

The surface and her inner self—in her heart a need to vent her anger accumulated, Haya changed into appropriate plain clothes and left to go to the unfamiliar town.

Thank you very much. We look forward to your next visit—a 100% textbook business smile and line has seen her off after she left the Namisagi brand's retail store.

Yeah... Namisagi's Arclight technology is amazing after all... it may take ten years if not more to catch up...

She spent two hours checking out plenty of new products that were on sale today but in the end she wasn't able to, for the store clerks she was an ultimately annoying (even though she was a kid) type of customer. Though, she herself wasn't bothered by it at all.

What currently occupied Haya's thoughts was the clear difference in the technology level between Kiritou and Namisagi.

...in the end, this is the only thing for me.

She hated herself for thinking about the company despite being alone.

Even though she went out for a change of pace, and yet she couldn't get away from thinking like a 'Kiritou's young lady'.

No matter where she goes, she can't escape——that's what she was reminded of.

"...let's stop this. It's depressing."

The words that came out involuntarily out of her mouth dissolved in the cold air. Her sigh dyed the air white and disappeared soon enough, she displayed her 'real self' where no one could see her.

Even as she strolled her mind didn't clear up. Just when she thought of that and decided to go back to the hotel, something caught her attention and she stopped her feet.

"That girl, the one from yesterday...?"

She was clad in a dirty parka, and even though her head was hidden by a hood, the distinctive bluish-black hair could be seen. It was definitely the thief girl she met last night. She was hiding in a back alley.

What is she doing?

Her curiosity was piqued and Haya stood still for a while observing her.

There was movement after five minutes passed. The moment a security drone tried to pass by the girl, she moved.

"_____!"

The girl expanded a window and operated it at high speed. The street-lights around suddenly started to glow strongly and emergency buzzers sounded all over. The passer-bys' attention was drawn to them and away from the drone.

Aiming for that moment, the girl jumped out quickly and got in close contact with the drone. She momentarily rewrote the internal information in it and disappeared in the back alley.

"That's..."

Haya examined the internal information of the drone that ceased its functions.

As expected, its behavioural pattern was changed by administrator privileges, it was set to 'stop' before reaching a 'certain place' where it was at time.

This, it was done by the girl from before wasn't it. Hacking into an administrator account in such a short time...

And the abnormal functions of the lights and buzzers before. That was also her doing.

But to hack into those in such a short time, moreover only by using the terminal's output meant her skills were on a different level.

I want to confirm it——such an idea came to her mind. She was very interested why would someone who has such skills do such a thing.

If I go to these coordinates then probably——

Haya expanded a map and proceeded with fast steps.

Fortunately because there was good security in this town, there were no problems. She walked for about ten minutes until she reached a run-down bar.

"...it should be here."

The coordinates that have been removed from the patrol drone's route were no doubt here.

Haya went up the dimly lit stairs and put a hand on the rusted doorknob. Suddenly a shadow appeared in her field of view.

"——Drop dead you damn intruder!"

"Wha..."

The door has been wide opened and the girl who seemed to wait on the other side attacked her. She had a thin wooden bar in her hands.

Danger——as soon as she thought that, Haya grabbed the girl's arm reflexively.

"...eh?"

"Fu——hyah!"

The moment the girl shouted, her small body danced in the air. Haya quickly entwined her with her legs and softly dropped her on the floor, she clamped down on her arm.

It was the grappling technique commonly called 'roark armbar', the girl started screaming.

"IT hurtsSSSSSss?! time out! Ouch ouch, I said it hurts didn't I?!"

"Of course it does. It's supposed to hurt. Rather than that! What are you thinking suddenly trying to hit me!"

"That's because you entered my house without permission!"

"...your house? What, you live here?"

"That's right!"

While still holding onto her arm strongly, Haya looked around the store.

Although the décor looked old, the counter and chairs as well as the tableware seemed like they were used recently, a feeling of life was there.

"...not only trespassing and stealing, but also illegal occupation. That's a three-hit combo."

"Shut up, it has nothing to do with you! Hurry up and let go of my hand you bobhead!"

"Annoying. Ah, I see. So you don't need this arm. Hmm."

"GyaaaaaaaAAAAAAAaaaAAa!!"

The arm made an ominous sound, and her screams resounded in the deserted bar.

"...Asumi Aoko, twelve years old."

When she asked about her name, the girl replied reluctantly.

Most likely because she was held down for three minutes, but the girl fell down on the counter looking tired——looking down on Asumi Aoko, Haya let out a small sigh. Why was she that interested in this girl.

Asumi Aoko was in a nutshell 'a girl who ran away from home'.

The years earlier she ran away from her adoptive parents' house and was living in this ran-down bar ever since then.

Of course she didn't go to school, and a minor without a guarantor couldn't rent a room.

Even so, she manages to survive somehow. She went outside to obtain food on every third day——that's when she sneaked in to the party venue——that's what she told her.

"...so, why did you steal my bracelet? You need money?"

"Ugh... that was an accident. The moment I rammed into you it was accidentally caught in my clothes. Even I have my pride, I wouldn't do something shameful like pickpocketing."

Stealing food was shameful as well, Haya thought, but she ignored that for the time being. Rather, she was interested in this girl who lived alone despite being the same age as she was.

"I know what happened yesterday. But how are you living your life? It doesn't seem like there's a bed here."

"There's both tap water and electricity in here as well as a shower. It's enough to survive."

Aoko no longer had any strength to resist and obediently responded.

It was just as she said, there was electricity in the store. But why was she using a run-down bar as her lifeline. Just when she thought of that

something came to her mind, earlier, she witnessed the hacking skills of the girl.

"It can't be, did you hack into the management company——?"

".....I-I had no choice but to do it if I wanted to live, that was an emergency."

"I see, so unauthorized access added to the list."

The number of charges increased again. But since she didn't intend on taking her to the police station, counting them was pointless.

"Anyway, who are you? You were at that venue, so I imagine you must be a considerable Ojou-sama."

"Ah, I haven't introduced myself have I. Kiritou Haya, same as you twelve years old."

"Kiritou...?"

Recognizing her last name, Aoko stood up and rummaged in the machinery piled up in the corner of the store. As Haya moved closer, she saw all of it was dirty, broken or in a bad state.

"That's a lot of machinery, where did you get it?"

"This? I stole it from discarded products——I'm just reusing them. I secretly borrowed the rest from the drones in the city."

"...you hacked into drones for that?"

So that was her real purpose. Haya was amazed.

"Oh, there it is. This is from Kiritou."

"Uwaa, you brought out something really old."

Aoko pulled out a small card-type machine. It was a product made ten years ago when Kiritou initially began to rise. Haya reflected its information on the terminal, and was surprised with its performance. The specs were

completely different from original. It wasn't the same as the one developed by Kiritou.

"...could it be that you remodelled it?"

"Nn? Ahh, speaking of which I tampered with it after I picked it up... about two years ago."

Although that's what Aoko said, it was not a modification on the level of 'tampering a little'. Haya was horrified by the fact that a twelve year old girl who didn't go to school could do such a thing.

"...I see, in other words a genius."

"That's right. Even though I say it about myself, I am a genius."

"That's boasting a lot."

"It's the truth so it can't be helped. Nevertheless, there are various elements I'm missing, but I'm still better than an inferior human like you."

"Fine, I get it. I haven't made you scream enough yet."

"Eh, no, you're wro——GYAHHHHHHH! My arm, i-it'll pop offfff!"

And before she noticed, Haya started to play with the girl called Aoko.

A young lady who lived in a sparkling world and the runaway girl who had trouble finding food every day. The two who had nothing that resembled each other and had completely different circumstances surrounding them felt comfortable when they were together.

"Now then, I'm going home... see you tomorrow."

"...sure, see you tomorrow."

That day, the two promised to meet again the other day for the first time in their lives.

Part 4

"Ga———"

A hatchet pierced the chest of one of the executives and he fell to the ground. A pale sphere of light left his body——the mental structure fell out and was absorbed into the girl's palm.

"...I have seized all the functions of this structure and disposed of completely, the thousands of employees. All that's left is you, Kiritou Kouya."

"....."

The headquarters building's structure, the thirty-fifth and the top floor, the executive board's meeting room. It was where the executives of the Kiritou Group were talking about the benefits and the fate of the company, it was all dominated by a single girl now.

All the executives who were vigorously discussing up until the last moment now were lying on the floor, the only one surviving was the man sitting in the top seat. Among this gruesome sight, four 《Zygotes》 were slowly taking steps towards him.

"You... Asumi Aoko... why are you here..."

"Why? What a stupid question. Do I have to explain the reasons to you one by one?"

Kouya who was sitting in a chair didn't move, no, he couldn't move.

On both of his sides were black knights who poised their hatchets making him unable to move. He could imagine that were he to move he would share the fate of the executives who lied on the floor.

"I have only one objective. You should know what it is."

Aoko glared at the unmoving Kouya and spat out coldly.

She had only one objective.

There is no way Kiritou Kouya, the man who erased the girl called Asumi Aoko from this world wouldn't know it.

"...revenge, is it."

"Correct. But it isn't limited just to you."

While saying that, she took a hatchet from one of black knights and aimed it at his neck.

"——Yeah. This is revenge. I will destroy you, and this castle you created without leaving a single piece of it. Just for that I've been clinging to this unsightly life of mine."

She broke her promise, confined ten thousand people, sacrificed her only friend, and used the dream they made together so that she could stand there.

Even though she knew just how sinful she was, she didn't stop. She couldn't stop.

"...what do you intend."

"You can't do anything even if I tell you that. Shut up and rot away."

She slowly lowered the hatchet.

"The hell you wished for... you can finally see it."

The hatchet was swung casually, Kouya didn't even scream as it cut into his neck.

And after being signalled, thousands of windows were deployed around Aoko producing a huge program in conjunction.

"Logic Bomb 《Indra》 Generation Sequence——Start."

According to Aoko's order, the mental structures of the ten thousand people robbed by 《Jail》 converged at one point. As the lights gradually started to give off a strong light, the ceiling and the floor started to disappeared and turning to dust.

"Just a little more... a little more and it'll be all over..."

Asumi Aoko stood there quietly and waited for the final demise to come.

Part 5

"...have you calmed down?"

"Yeah. Thanks."

Although Haya's complexion hasn't returned to normal yet, it was much better now. Taiga exhaled with relief.

It was the third floor of the headquarters' structure, a small room that had about eight tatami of space and a hidden door.

Haya said "When I was small I made it by hollowing out a portion of structure, something like a secret base.", it seemed like Aoko didn't know about this room.

Now then... what do we do now.

Taiga thought of what to do next.

Although they didn't know about this room, it was a matter of time until they tear it down and find them. Although he confirmed the stage of other levels while falling, there seemed to be a large amount of 『Zygotes』 on every floor. And their total number was—honestly, he didn't want to think about it.

I don't know what's Asumi Aoko's objective, but being here is dangerous. I'm worried about Fuyuki, we need to hurry and log out.

—— I'm going to the top floor. If there is something, come up there and tell me there.

That's what Aoko said. Although that line seemed like an invitation, but unless they do something about her they won't be able to log out. There was no other choice.

...first we need to ensure a way to fight.

Between this place and the top floor there were countless 『Zygotes』, they had no choice but to break through.

Of course, breaking through with his bare hands was out of the question. Were he to be surrounded it would be the end of the line.

Unexpectedly the room, no, the entire structure started to shake violently. Taiga and Haya lost their balance.

"What?!"

The moment Taiga looked up, he saw electromagnetic waves run through the structure, the walls became transparent and he saw the sky far above them through it.

In there was a giant sphere of light shining above them and growing. Seeing the empty sphere in the sky, Haya shouted.

"『Indra』 ...?!! Aoko, you want to destroy Kiritou that much?!"

Just by seeing the fear and shock on Haya's face Taiga was able to assess the risk.

Taiga himself as well instinctively guessed——it would put everything to an end equally. Whether it were people or objects, once they were swallowed by that they would turn into dust.

"What's that?"

"...know anything about Logic Bomb?"

"No, haven't heard of it."

"It's a type of a cyber weapon. A program which overloads the operation area and causes errors that destroy it. 『Indra』 is the worst among

programs of that type. It's a genocidal weapon specializing in the destruction of large-scale structures."

"...that's some dangerous wording."

It was something he would never hear in normal everyday life. But as he looked at the sphere of light he didn't feel any discomfort.

"The one who made it, was it Asumi Aoko?"

"Yeah. Aoko said so herself, that this is an inhumane program that shouldn't have been created."

"Inhumane?"

"The problem is not the fact that it destroys a large-scaled structure... it's the material 《Indra》 is composed of."

Haya sat down on the bed and expanded a window.

It was Kiritou headquarters' structure floor plan, on it there were red and white dot marks. While there were countless red dots on it, the only two white dots were on the third floor.

"...looks like all the employees have been taken down."

"That's... the response of virtual bodies is it."

Judging from the number and location the two white dots was Taiga and Haya. And the red dots must've been Kiritou employee's beaten by the black knights. The 《Jail》 installed on them must have sucked out their mental structure——

"...wait."

The dots connected.

Inhumane. The worst program. He heard earlier that a mental structure was a mass of data impossible to analyse. After connecting all the information he had, there was only one answer.

"It can't be... the material 《Indra》 uses is——human souls?"

"To be exact, a large amount of mental structures."

Haya emotionlessly corrected Taiga's words.

When he assumed that, the current situation all made sense. A large amount of employees has been called to the headquarters structure today to deal with the appearing troubles, and they all needed to be hunted down as fast as possible. For that, 『Zygotes』 were used and to complete it they were equipped with—— 『Jail』 .

"If 『Indra』 was triggered, then all the people inside of the structure will die due to the excess load applied to their brains. Kiritou will literally disappear without a trace."

"How long will it take until it's completed?"

"I don't know the details, but it won't take long."

So there was no time to lose.

Then, Haya grasped Taiga's arm slowly and forced a window open. She took out the complex attack-configured program 『Heavenly Sword』 and the costume he was using in 『Aries』 .

"What are you intending to do?"

"You're going to stop Aoko aren't you? I'm modifying 『Heavenly Sword』 so that it can be used in here. Wait a moment."

She said that and without waiting for his reply she started to change the program. The percentage on the window said 1%, indicating modification completion status. It went up to 2% soon enough.

"...I'm going as well."

Haya said it quietly, there were no hesitation in her eyes.

"Can you do it?"

Taiga stared into her eyes with anticipation.

He could see it in Asumi Aoko's eyes, she wasn't someone who would let herself be persuaded. She had to be forcefully stopped. In other words——annihilate her.

"No matter the reason, I can't allow her to do such a thing. I need to stop that idiot."

I'll go no matter what. She made such a response which indicated she had a strong determination. Taiga frowned.

"Even so, I can't go up while carrying you."

"That's all right. I've thought it over properly."

There was a possibility of Haya getting attacked by Zygotes if she were to be left behind anyway. Them staying together would ensure she was safe.

"...just tell me one thing. What exactly is the current Asumi Aoko? Why is she using Iora's virtual body?"

"...well, I guess you have the right to know."

She prompted Taiga to sit down and looked up at the ceiling with a distant look in her eyes.

"Let's start... from when Aoko first came to Kiritou."

Part 6

——Both Kiritou Haya and Asumi Aoko were lonely.

The girl who was born to a blessed household and was forced to become a 'lady', and the girl who was born into a poor environment and was forced to become an adult.

Starting with a chance encounter and short but intense days. For the first time ever since they were born the girls found a 'friend' with whom they could openly speak with.

—My body is tainted. That was Asumi Aoko's favourite phrase.

She was separated from her parents when they died and taken to her relatives. It wasn't common, but it wasn't a rare story either.

But what was unfortunate for her, was the fact that her foster family was badly distorted.

For Asumi Aoko whose every day was hell, Elysion was an utopia.

It wasn't an illusion nor a myth, a perfect world existed which spread out majestically in front of her eyes. Denying the ugly reality, it was a place like a dream where she could change anything as she wanted to.

Then one day, she ran away from the hell.

While struggling to survive, she surrounded herself with the things she loved. And—she met with Haya, which made her even happier.

That's when Kiritou Kouya appeared in front of her. He knew of Haya's suspicious actions and had his secretary investigate it in secret.

I want to hire you——that's what Kouya said after witnessing Aoko's talent.

Although Kiritou was called one of the four major corporations, they paled in comparison to the other three.

The yet-emerging company didn't have a brand, nor research and development that has been ongoing for many years. What Kiritou Kouya wanted was a genius who could overturn the absolute factor, time.

Asumi Aoko accepted the invitation and became a researcher at Kiritou.

Aoko's existence was top secret and only a few of the executives knew of her, since Haya was at a similar age to her she has been appointed as her watchdog.

Then one day, two years after she came to Kiritou.

Haya was working in her laboratory like usual, and Aoko also entered it by using 《Transition》 like she always did. She seemed to have an excited expression on her face.

"Haya! Look, I found something great!"

"...Aoko, I say it every time. Can you stop releasing my room's security without permission? It's bad for my heart."

"Then make security I can't break through. Though, that would be impossible"

"Was that supposed to be sarcastic..."

That kind of chat was already familiar to them.

Haya put her work on hold and sighed.

Even though it was almost summer, Aoko was wearing clothes that covered everything up to her wrists and ankles as well as a white coat on top of it. Haya recalled the reason she hid her skin, and entered a melancholic mood.

"...so, what did you find?"

"Oh. Look, this. I look around the company data and stumbled upon it."

What was projected in the air was an artificially-beautiful girl.

Her smiling expression had no emotions, felt dead as if it was a noh mask. Her eyes were closed as if she was asleep.

"...AI?"

It was a prototype version from a few generations ago, a really old AI. Haya looked in Aoko's eyes amazed.

"So what's so unusual about it?"

"It's the first time I've seen one, though I've knew of them before."

"Ah—...now that you say it."

AI was something 'convenient to have' back then, but in the end the results were not worth the development funds. Of course, Kiritou didn't involve themselves with these.

"An AI is just a doll that mechanically follows instructions programmed into them. What made you interested in it?"

"Indeed it is as you say, she's a doll right now. She's unable to think for herself nor act by her own discretion."

Aoko continued to lay out words one after another as if to persuade her. Although it was infuriating, Haya encouraged her to continue.

"With what has been installed into her she's only able of making basic responses, her thinking circuitry is extremely primitive. Thinking of the past, dreaming of the future, it's incomparable to a human brain which is constantly thinking. And the most important thing— are the emotions."

"...aren't you ashamed of using that dramatic tone of voice?"

"Stop laughing at me. Anyway, when I saw her I thought that were an AI to have emotions, it would be no different from humans."

"That's probably pointless. There's nothing to obtain from that."

Haya rejected her words all at once.

AIs have their own role, if they were given something as uncertain as feelings it was unknown what kind of effect it would cause. Were a machine to forget its duties, it would overturn everything that was known.

But Aoko wasn't bothered with her words and just shrugged in a grand manner.

"Ha~ya~. You're getting a bit too stained with the corporation's point of view. You should think about things in a more free manner."

"Is it something a corporation-dedicated researcher should say?"

"Those are two different things. As always, you're horrible at switching between public and private matters... listen and consider this. Aren't AIs a significant existence for people?"

"Well, in general they are."

"In other words its something that is necessary for an owner's daily life. Then why not develop a relationship between them similar to friendship?"

"...friendship eh."

She tried to imagine it for a moment.

Her lonely life and meeting of Kiritou Haya and meeting with Aoko, and now an AI staying together with them. Sharing the fun days and the fights with each other——

"How enviable."

She suddenly returned to earth and blocked her mouth in a hurry, Aoko heard it clearly. She made a nasty grin and——

"Then how about we try making one?"

She said such a thing.

"...ha? What?"

"How dull. I said that me and you should make an AI that has emotions. You think it's nice as well don't you?"

"Well I thought so for a bit but... you got your own research too don't you. Moreover, I don't think you'll get a permit for developing an AI."

"Hmm. Then if I get the permission will you cooperate?"

"Only if you do. But that's absolutely impossible."

Haya answered appropriately, with this the topic was closed.

However, a few days later just as she declared, Aoko has obtained permission from Kiritou Kouya.

And the two undertook the task of developing an AI that had emotions.

With Asumi Aoko as the lead developer, it was a small project with only two people in it. And its name used characters from the project leader's name and was called thus—— 《Iolite》 .[1]

Part 7

Gradually the modification rate for 《Heavenly Sword》 was nearing 100%.

As Haya stopped talking, a question appeared in Taiga's head.

"How did Asumi Aoko obtain Kiritou Kouya's permission? He isn't someone who could be persuaded so easily."

He could tell just by looking at his face. Kouya wasn't a person who'd listen to people. There had to be something behind this.

"Yeah. I've learned about it later, but it seemed like he turned it down once. But since she wanted to do AI research she proposed to him a trade."

"Trade?"

"...I've told you before. Profit is most important for us. Kiritou will do anything as long as it profits."

"Yeah. And then she dabbled in the development of military programs—— that's what it means."

"Yes."

Asumi Aoko proposed an exchange. After being told this much, he realized its contents.

She took a step into the worst research of 《Jail》 and 《Indra》 in order to obtain some freedom.

"From now on it's the main issue. Aoko and I began the research on AI in earnest. Virtual personality, in other words a mental structure created

artificially. But something like that couldn't be simply created by human hands."

They could only create a superficial personality configuration. But the soul underlying it, its life, creating a will which would output emotions from the scratch was stepping into God's realm.

"We had gave up on creating it from a scratch. What had caught our attention was the study of Hologhosts which was actively carried out all over the world."

"Hologhosts? Haven't heard of them."

"It's a quite famous research. It can be called an end point theme for the cyber era. Discarding the unwanted real body and living eternally after becoming a pure soul. In a nutshell, a study of immortality."

—Immortality.

In all eras and places it was silently talked about, a dream everyone had at least once.

Everyone who has obtained everything, they could have said in the end 'I don't want to die', a primitive desire.

One of the Hologhost's concept's of affixing the mental structure to virtual was helpful in building the AI. And from discovering something already existing and applying it our study had began. Even though we started with a bright concept... Aoko has found it."

It was supposed to be impossible.

From the day Elysion was born, countless researchers aimed for it and were equally frustrated by their failures. But by chance, or maybe because of God's mischief—Asumi Aoko arrived at the sanctuary no one could follow her into.

"By burning out the brain through excessive load and completely cutting the connection with the body the mental structure could affixed to the virtual world... she found such a method."

"In other words, a method to become a Hologhost."

"That's the kind of thing it is in a nutshell."

Even Asumi Aoko didn't expect that. However her extraordinary talent changed impossible into possible despite her not wanting it.

"Aoko created Iora by using the knowledge she gained in that research. But after consulting with me we promised not to reveal anything about the research on Hologhost and keep it secret. It wasn't something not worth consulting. And yet..."

"Asumi Aoko used it."

Asumi Aoko died by burning out her brain, and became a Hologhost living in the virtual world. She entered Iora's body and continued to hide in it.

"...the reason she used Iora's body can be inferred. Hologhosts cannot move without a virtual body and there is no other body as suitable as that one. After all, Aoko was the one who designed it, the adaptation rate must have been considerably higher."

After finishing her story, Haya spat out the air in a sigh.

Taiga summarized the information in his head.

Currently Asumi Aoko was activating the program which was to destroy the entire structure – Logic Bomb 『Indra』 using the mental structure of all the employees as material. If it's triggered it's all GAME OVER, everyone dies.

"Is there a method to stop 『Indra』 ?"

"There is no way to stop the sequence until its complete. Aoko is now a Hologhost, her mental structure will disappear together with her virtual body's elimination. That should stop it."

Elimination, the moment she said that Haya's expression shook for an instant. Her disturbance disappeared soon enough and a sense of mission 'it's something that has to be done' dwelled in her. The danger that light posed couldn't be overlooked.

"...all right, it's done."

The moment Haya murmured that a high pitched sound rang out, a nodachi appeared in front of Taiga all at once. The moment he grasped it his body was clad in light and he changed into the outfit he wore in 《Aries》, a white long coat.

"Now then, let's go."

"...yeah."

Taiga stared at Haya's emotionless back, and chased after her.

Part 8

"Haa... haa..."

"Your breathing has roughened considerably. It's about time your processing speed decreased."

"No way. ...let's go!"

Just as she cried out a dozen of crystals appeared and were released at 《Angel》 in unison.

Each and every one of them was a powerful attack-configured program capable of destroying it. Before the literally deadly arrows, Angel swayed its hand. An exactly same number of sinister red crystals appeared behind it and intercepted the blue crystals. The pure white space was dyed in two colours, red and blue.

"...being able to develop such a number of programs in just a moment. If we considered just the processing speed you might be above me. Looks like it was a correct course of action to deal with you like this."

As Fuyuki's breathing turned rough because of excessive calculations, Angel made a relaxed smile.

They have exchanged about fifty attacks already. Assuming every time they used about twenty programs, after a simple calculation it would add up to a thousand—it was impossible for a program to withstand such a load no matter how good it was.

"You... are you borrowing a calculation space from somewhere outside?"

Fuyuki was confident about that question, Angel laughed faintly, saying it's 'correct'.

"If it were my real self then maybe, but this program can't stop you. My calculation space is currently directly connected to the Kiritou's main server. It's a huge server capable of managing multiple large-scaled structures. No matter how fast your processing speed is, it's impossible for you to break through it."

In other words, it meant that to destroy Angel she would need enough strength to destroy the entire Kiritou server.

An ant and an elephant... that wouldn't be enough to describe it.

She couldn't win.

No matter how good at processing data and calculation a human was, they couldn't compete with a server which could maintain a vast world's heaven and earth. It was an overwhelming difference, the measures she used made no difference.

"Certainly, Little Sister can't do anything alone."

Nevertheless, Fuyuki build another attack-configured program.

"...you don't know when to give up."

Angel let out a tired sigh and began interception. It was nearly three times the number of the crystals released before, but that level of attack could be easily intercepted if Angel had the backup of the main server.

From the overwhelming raw power difference, a small opportunity to catch the enemy off guard appeared.

That's why. When she hid a very very small program in the shadow of the large amount of crystals. Angel overlooked it.

As red and blue crystals clashed releasing a flurry of sparks, the barrier blocking off the structure was distorted for just a moment.

The tiny program was shot out through that distortion and used 『Transition』 to enter another structure beyond the barrier.

Part 9

"Ahh, Shio-chan. If you don't stir it faster that's going to be burnt you know?"

"Eh? A-awawa?!"

A fragrant smell drifted in café 『Paradise』 which was empty despite it being a holiday.

Shio was standing in the kitchen behind the counter with a pair of chopsticks in her hand and stirred eggs in a hurry as they started to rapidly solidify. Her movements couldn't be called 'good' even if it was to be blatant flattery. Rui was racking her brain.

"Hmm. What can I do to teach you?"

"I'm sorry for bothering you..."

"No, the one who said she'll practice with you is Rui-san. For now let's throw away these scorched scrambled eggs, Rui-san will tell you how to do it now."

As Rui picked the frying pan while saying that, a small electronic sound came from the terminal.

"Mail——it's from Fuyuki. It says...eh?"

"What happened Rui-chan?"

Rui put on a disturbed expression the moment she opened the window, concerned by something. Shio stopped her hands that were working and moved closer. Rui turned the window so that she could see the contents as well——

"...please lend me your strength, it says."

Seeing unknown coordinates marked in there, the two tilted their necks puzzled.



Chapter 5 - Requiem Played In The Sky

Part 1

Asumi Aoko was a 'different' girl.

The place she was born in wasn't one built of concrete, but one surrounded by nature. A mountain village.

She was born to be the only daughter of an ordinary household which worked in agriculture, she spent her childhood while not being exposed to the virtual world.

The turning point for her was her fifth birthday.

With the terminal she was given by her parents as a present, Aoko's talent started blossoming.

The girl pulled off feats no one else could do, her parents were proud of her being such a 'genius'.

Reaction of the villagers was just the opposite, chilly. Originally the cyber technology wasn't popular in the rural areas. In such a small world, Aoko was treated as 'abnormal' for her technical genius.

It was primordial fear of an existence they couldn't understand.

When her parents died in an accident, they attacked her out of malice and kicked her out of village. She was taken care of by relatives of her mother.

She was responsible for laundry and cooking in there.

Rather than a child, that family wanted a convenient handyman——if that was the truth, she would live a decent life. However, reality was cruel. They vented their anger on Aoko in the form of violence.

As she lived her hellish everyday life, she learned a single truth.

—— I will never be able to walk in the light.

Part 2

"——Haa!!"

Taiga bisected a black knight who was falling at him from above and jumped, kicking off the wall again.

"That's a really ridiculous bodily strength."

Haya was watching as Taiga rose five metres in the air at a stretch and wanted to raise her voice objecting to such a sight. She ordered "leap" quietly and the silvery-white knight who had Haya on its shoulder jumped, following Taiga. The two of them and one virtual entity were rising up by climbing up the terrace in the middle rather than use stairs again.

"But is 'that' really safe?"

"It's all right, I've got it properly under my control. Want to try manipulating it?"

While saying so, Haya lightly poked the silver knight——which was still a Zygote just a few minutes earlier.

That's what Haya meant when she said she 'thought of it'.

"To think you would steal the controls of a Zygote and remodel it..."

"I knew these guys could be controlled. I'm glad I prepared measures to do that just in case. If possible I'd like to control several of them though."

Haya analysed the attack-configured program Angel created and thought ahead, making a program she could use.

But as expected, not talking about the horde of hundreds of them, she could only use it on one.

The enemy's forces didn't change, the White Knight rushed through the looming Zygotes destroying them. Sometimes he put Haya who was clad in plain clothes on its shoulder as if it was a knight protecting a princess.

The entrance hall was far below them already, they had already advanced about eighty metres. At this rate they'll reach it soon enou—

"——?!"

A chill went Taiga's spine, he twisted his body making an immediate judgement.

A huge hatchet cleaved where his neck was just a moment before. Were his reaction be delayed by even a second, he would be already dead.

"Taiga?! Kuh!!"

Haya reached out to Taiga who was falling, pulled down by gravity. But at that moment an army of Zygotes appeared by 《Transition》, there were at least twenty of them.

So many...! White Knight alone isn't—

The White Knight's specs were higher after remodelling by Haya, but it wasn't a large difference. If they fought then she would lose without a doubt—however, the black knights ignored Haya and fell down, following Taiga.

"...did they... overlook me?"

——No. It's her, she's calling me. There was no reason, but she intuitively thought so.

"—Head straight to the top floor."

After staring at the bottom for a moment, she commanded the White Knight.

I'll stop Aoko. That's something I must do!

Tenryo Taiga was just 'an outsider who was unfortunate to get involved'.

Were he not to meet her, he wouldn't have had to suffer such an experience. She couldn't involve him any more than this in the circumstances of Kiritou.

Just which gear started turning it in this direction.

When they met six years ago, when Aoko came to Kiritou, when they decided on developing Iora, or when she has discovered a way to become a Hologhost. Where did they make a mistake.

She didn't know. No matter how long she thought about it, she couldn't find it. Even so——

"...I will stop you, Aoko."

"I'd like to see if you can, Haya. Literally, stop me by force."

The two embraced the wishes they won't give up, and stood on the final stage.

The light converged at one point.

Ten thousand mental structures gathered throughout Kiritou structure——the souls condensed in one place giving off a brilliant shine and forming one huge circuit. By bundling together the information which could be called God's inviolable area, it created an arrow of destruction to annihilate all that existed in that space.

"I'm honestly surprised that a day like this would come, where we stand against each other."

"...so you say. There's no way someone as smart as you wouldn't predict me interfering. It was all pre-calculated by you wasn't it...?"

"Hmm, I wonder."

Under the giant light——the Logic Bomb 《Indra》 , the two girls faced each other.

"...why are you doing something like this?"

Haya asked quietly.

"I've been thinking about this all the time. Why would you use 『Indra』 to crush Kiritou. Answer me Aoko, why would your feet slip from the proper road!"

She broke the promise between the two of them, she became a presence that only lived as a soul.

Reaping ten thousand lives and using them to destroy everything—the reason for that, the source of that hatred, Haya didn't know of it. She needed to learn about it.

"A reason huh. I don't mind telling you, but can you really bother with that now?"

"...what do you mean?"

"Generating 『Indra』 has reached the final stage. I think you know it already, but destroying it is impossible since it's a mass of 『Impossible to Analyse Data』. The only way you can save yourself and Tenryo Taiga is to eliminate me. You don't have time to waste by chatting do you."

"From the way you talk, it seems like you won't withdraw obediently?"

"Foolish question. If my determination was weak enough to stop because of that, I would have obediently died a year ago."

A year ago—with these words Haya recalled Aoko's funeral.

For her who had no relatives the funeral was very simple, the only one attending was Haya.

The cause of her death was heart disease. In fact, she was sentenced to 'live six months longer' one month before she died. That's why it didn't inspire any doubts in Haya when she died.

However, Aoko has become a Hologhost.

The cause of her death must have been excess load on her brain. That meant—

"You committed a suicide haven't you."

"...it was Kiritou Kouya's doing. Were I to simply 'commit suicide' the cause of death could be easily found by examining my body. Honestly it helped me, you were the only one who could examine my body and find out that I became a Hologhost."

"...that shitty man."

Haya insulted Kouya in low voice.

That man must have silenced the police and without scruples provided a fake cause of death. Aoko predicted that and used it to become a Hologhost, moreover thanks to that she was treated as if she died of illness.

"Now, chat time's over."

pachin, a dry sound of Aoko's finger snapping could be heard.

A 《Zygote》 emerged from the black stain directly above Aoko. The shape of its armour was different from the ones that were part of her main fighting force. Probably it was specially modified by her.

"Both of us have a pawn. That's perfect. How about a proxy battle?"

"...a fight between Zygotes huh. Very well."

Just as the two girls took a step back at the same time, the white and black knight stood in front.

"Oh, that's right. A single piece of good news for you. Currently I'm using part of my consciousness in order to stall Tenryou Taiga. Think of it as of a handicap."

"...is that so. I'll accept it gratefully."

Kiritou Haya was far inferior to Asumi Aoko. That wasn't a guess but an undeniable fact.

But if what she said was truth, then she was remotely operating dozens of 『Zygotes』 and engaged in combat with Taiga. There might be a chance Haya might be able to exploit.

There were two ways to damage a virtual body. Either to attack it with an attack-configured program or erode it with a virus.

One of the pawns, the White Knight was originally 『Zygote』, a virus.

There were means of attacking, as well as a chance for victory.

All that's left——was to run it.

"Let's go, Aoko!"

According to Haya's order, the White Knight charged forward while holding a hatchet.

The Black Knight started moving at the same time, the two knights clashed with a tremendous roar.

Exhausting the program processing ability the two knights' slashes crossed. Their trajectories were painted with white and black, an intense sparks scattered throughout the air.

"Ahaha, your pawn's not that bad!"

"It doesn't feel like it! I know it's nowhere near enough myself!"

"No such thing. I know how proficient you are very well. That's why——I will get a bit serious as well!"

As Aoko said that, five windows appeared.

Aoko spread her hands like an orchestra conductor and started operating on the windows with all ten of her fingers at once. The Black Knight's armour started to change ominously and he pushed the White Knight back.

"Tchh——damn it!"

Haya immediately opened a window to strengthen the White Knight in response.

Stronger, faster, tougher, the two girls continued to cause evolution in their pawn's armoured bodies.

《Zygotes》 combat ability was fairly simple.

The foundation of their actions were 'optimal motions corresponding to the current situation'. They were aware of what was happening, moved and acted with maximal efficiency under the current conditions. That's why neither Haya nor Aoko interfered with their movements and only improved their pawn's performance.

The trajectory of the slashes felt into disarray, they started fending off each other's intense attacks.

At first glance it seemed like the battle was evenly matched. But little by little the White Knight Haya was using slowly started to become cover with cracks.

"You monster... You really aren't using your full strength are you!"

"How horrible, calling me a monster. In the first place, have you ever won against me?"

"I never lost in arm wrestling!"

Haya desperately tried to bite back at her, but Aoko laughed when she heard that and her fingers continued to dance.

The White Knight could no longer defend. It barely managed to divert the black knight's attack, the black hatchet crushed its armour and shaved it off.

I didn't think winning would be easy, but to think there was such a big difference...!

That talent was something else, Haya clenched her teeth.

—She couldn't reach.

The speed of her thoughts, processing area, information analysis. Asumi Aoko was winning in every one of these factors.

And yet, Aoko was still spending some of her thought processes to fight against Taiga. Were she to use her full strength——she wouldn't survive even a second.

It didn't mean Haya was weak.

Even earlier than Fuyuki, she has been thoroughly educated from early childhood and recognized as a gifted child, she was classified among top class researchers in Kiritou. It was just that Asumi Aoko's ability was not normal.

"There's no one who can beat me in Elysion... you're the one who should know that the best. As usual, you hate losing don't you."

"Shut up!"

Even as they exchanged words, the Black Knight's evolution continued to accelerate.

There were no foolish and flashy moves from either of them. Bit by bit, the White Knight's escape route was being crushed as the number of choices it could do was being limited.

"Good grief... so is the match over with this?"

"It's not over yet."

Although that's what Haya said, the outcome was already determined. The Black Knight has surpassed the White Knight in every attribute, even changing strategy wouldn't give it a chance.

"How stubborn... fine. I'm already bored with you, it's time for the next step. It's time to end this."

Responding to Aoko's order, the Black Knight let out an eerie roar. That moment the black hatchet released a huge amount of miasma and became a huge sword.

"I will put an end to this."

With a roar, the black sword was swung down.

Despite raising the hatchet in order to defend, it was torn through and the White Knight's body was cleaved apart like a piece of paper. Half of the White Knight's body collapsed and it could no longer function.

The Black Knight brandished its huge sword in no time and aimed for Haya who was left unguarded——just as Haya predicted.

"Naive—— 《Intercept》 !!"

Haya implanted a silver crystal in it, she used the opportunity that appeared when it made a roundhouse slash. The Black Knight's movement suddenly stopped.

Its movements stopped for less than a second, but that was enough.

The right side of the White Knight's body rose up and cleaved the defenceless Black Knight's torso.

"Wha..."

"It's over, Aoko!"

Aoko was shaken for a moment. Haya didn't miss that opportunity. She closed the distance to her not giving her time to summon a 《Zygote》 and hit her neck!

kiyinn, a high-pitched metallic sound rang out.

Haya's breath turned rough and her head was aching because she overdid it with excessive calculations, she tried getting rid of the excess hit in her head.

It was quite reckless. In just a moment she used the 《Intercept》 which was a very forceful move. Her brain was exhausted after continuing the fight, the fatigue hit her now.

"But, with this somehow..."

She was able to stop her——that's how it should have been.

"That made me a bit surprised."

As a cool voice shook her eardrum, Haya moved her body away.

"That 《Intercept》 is the program which snatched away the control over 《Zygote》 from me right? It's effect allows to temporarily override administrative privileges. Although I've been wary, to think you could steal the control from me even for a second... as expected of you."

The huge hatchet that was supposed to drop on her neck has been stopped by something that look like a rod.

It was thin enough for even Aoko's hands to use it. It was clad in jet-black haze which increases its eeriness several times.

This is bad——her instincts was sounding the alarm bells.

Haya tried to return to the White Knight immediately, but before that a black slash cut through the silvery armour. The White Knight could no longer maintain itself and disappeared, changing into particles of light.

"I didn't want to do something as uncouth as fighting myself. I wonder if this body still remembers it? When I created a weapon it naturally took this shape."

What was in Aoko's hands, was a jet-black scythe like the incarnation of darkness itself.

It was exactly the same as the weapon the Grim Reaper virus used once. But for some reason, the way she poised it now felt dozen times more frightening than the original.

"...let's go."

That moment, Aoko disappeared like smoke.

I lost sight of her, where is——the moment she tried to turn around in a hurry, an nasty sound rang out. At the same time she felt discomfort as if someone was pulling out her intestines.

"I will not stop. Until everything turns into ash, I will step over all hindrances. Even if it's my my partner."

Aoko spoke those words right beside Haya's ears. After slowly pulled out the scythe out of her abdomen, Haya's body losed its strength and rolled on the ground.

Not goo—

Haya's consciousness was fading away. In an attempt to clear the field of vision that was being dyed white, she formed a fist and stabbed her nails into her hand.

There was no pain. Even when she hit her stomach with her fist she couldn't feel any pain.

The Cyber World blocked out the pain. But it didn't block out the feeling of impact. It was surely mentally damaging. Currently Haya was determined 'absolutely not to fall' which allowed her to maintain her consciousness.

"Goho... geho!"

She got a fit of coughing and a rebound from her stomach.

Let alone standing up, she couldn't even move. She desperately raised her face to look at Aoko who looked down on at her with cold eyes and smiled with satisfaction.

"Yup, you're perfectly on the brink of death. You'll be a great bait like this."

...b...ait?

Haya was only able to catch the word 'bait', but she understood its meaning soon enough. The whole situation proceeded to the next stage.

A sudden explosion roared from centre of the floor.

Minced pieces of the Black Knights' appeared from the central terrace and disappeared after turning into particles of light. A white shadow holding a blade landed on the top floor.

"You came at last, Tenryo Taiga. Aren't you late."

"....."

He ignored Aoko's provocative words, his eyes wandered towards the scythe and then his gaze switched to Haya who was lying on the floor beside Aoko.

"...you bitch, so you would go that far."

Taiga said that in a horribly flat voice. Anger was swelling up in him, he took a step forward. Seeing him like that Aoko expanded a window in the air.

There, he saw Angel exchange attacks with Fuyuki by using crystals.

"——Fuyuki!!"

Although Taiga yelled, his voice didn't reach her.

The Fuyuki on the screen seemed like she was nearing her limits, she continued to desperately shoot down the red crystals with a hand pressed on her head.

"As you can see, your little sister is in my hands. Continuing to harass her like this isn't bad, but I might as well turn her into a part of 『Indra』 . There's not that much fuel for it to use."

Cloudy, black emotions accumulated in his belly.

I won't let you. I'll protect people who are precious to me——that's the reason I've been living for. That's why I seeked strength.

If he allowed such a thing, he wouldn't be able to forgive himself.

"...but this one'll be first."

At the end of his field of view, the large scythe was swung up casually.

Its blade was aimed at Haya who has fallen on the floor and couldn't move. Seeing her pupils beg for help, Taiga cried out.

"Wait——!"

"First."

slosh—a horrible fleshy sound could be heard, a quiet scream spilled from Haya's mouth.

"...Tenryo Taiga. The first irregular that has barged into this plan. As a countermeasure for you who has interfered with 『Jail』's and 『Zygote』's performance test, it was essential to carry out this plan."

Although Aoko said something, it didn't enter Taiga's ears.

What occupied his mind, was anger which blazed crimson.

Haya's body collapsed face down, in his mind it overlapped with the appearance of his dead parents. His emotions were dyed red, everything other than Asumi Aoko disappeared from his field of vision.

"I thought a lot about it. I came up with some countermeasures, but in the end I decided on something easier. Basically, humans become weak when they are tired."

He clenched the nodachi's handle with all his strength.

His endlessly gushing murderous intent was relayed to the weapon, he said quietly.

"——I'll kill you."

That moment, Taiga jumped tremendously fast.

⟨"Activate——Synchro Infinity!!"⟩

Driven by his rage, he pulled out his trump card.

After he smashed a sky blue crystal, the shackles that tied up Tenryo Taiga have fallen off.

He cut through the air, leaving behind the scenery. Taiga swung his nodachi at Aoko's neck who was looking at him with a condescending smile!

"...when people who surround you get hurt, you become emotional. That's your weakness, Tenryo Taiga."

The nodachi that was supposed to slip into her neck was blocked with a black liquid.

As he looked up momentarily, he saw a large hole about two metres in diameter in the air from which a black miasma overflowed.

"Come, let's start the second act."

She grabbed the neck of Haya who fell over and sprang back. The black miasma surrounded Taiga and formed black knights. Their number was thirty or more.

However, that wasn't enough to stop Taiga as he currently was.

"Out of my way——!!"

Fifth form 《Heavenly Mist》 . More than a dozen black knights turned into particles and disappeared.

The reason he struggled with them before, was because he was unable to attack. Just thirty of the knights weren't an opponent for Taiga in his fully synchronized state.

"Oh-ho, that's no good. There's still a lot of them out there."

As to replenish the numbers after those which disappeared, more miasma continued to flow out of the hole in the air and formed a dozen of Zygotes once again. Taiga took a step back and fought them off reflexively. Although he chopped them into pieces quickly, their resupply didn't stop.

"No matter how many viruses of this degree you gather, it won't work!"

"I bet. They cannot seal your attacks like they could before. Even if there were fifty of them they wouldn't be able to stand up to you. But... how about time?"

"Time?"

Taiga's movements didn't stop. Every time a keen flash of steel cut the black armour an arm or head was cut off.

Aoko let out a ridiculing laughter as she overlooked him seesawing back and forth.

"That program of yours... it's called 『Synchro Infinity』 isn't it. How long can you use it?"

"_____?!!"

His movements were disturbed after he heard Aoko's words.

It was true that 『Synchro Infinity』 continued to hack him and there was a large strain on the brain, it couldn't be used for long periods of time. Its creator, Fuyuki said that there's a five minute limit. However, Aoko shouldn't have known it.

"Could you not underestimate me? You think I was just watching your previous fight with 『Zygote』 for my enjoyment? I was searching for your weakness."

During the fight two weeks ago. Taiga did indeed use 『Synchro Infinity』 for his final attack.

But that was triggered only for a few seconds. So she must have managed to find its disadvantages in such a short time.

"I can understand the program's performance just by looking. I figured it out immediately that using it must've involved an accordingly high risk. After learning that, finding countermeasures against you was easy."

pachin, Aoko snapped her fingers.

The hole in the air further expanded and started to drop a torrent of miasma. All of it turned into Zygotes and pushed onto Taiga with sheer mass.

"Until your head starts screaming, I'll continue to conduct this song."

—Stalling for time.

In short that's how Aoko's tactic could be described, it was an extremely simple thing.

However, Taiga was worried about the time limit. Were he to fight with this inexhaustible supply of troops prepared by using players from a large-scaled structure, this tactic could be deadly to him.

"Shit..."

He cut down Zygotes surging from all sides.

Releasing 《Synchro Infinity》 was not an option. The moment he releases it, he would have been overpowered by the horde of enemies.

The only choice was to break through by concentrating on one point. But Aoko wouldn't allow it. The attack came from all directions at all times, the forces were replenished the instant they fell and wouldn't thin out.

"Let's start it... the final stage which will make you run out of strength!"

In response to Aoko's words, the Black Knights' movements were revitalized. The deadly battle has begun.

"...the number passed four hundred and fifty. I can't say I expected this."

Seeing the sight in front her, Aoko let out a breath and exclaimed involuntarily.

What spread in front of her, was truly a battlefield. In order to crush one boy a number of soldiers flocked. The boy was slashing the black downpour which pushed on him from all directions. The tip of the sword moved at a crazy speed which made it blur as it continued cutting apart one Black Knight after another.

"Taking down more than one per second... that's an instant death one should fear. It was the correct decision to be wary."

Aoko infested a number of virtual bodies with 《Zygote》 and reared them. Their number was approximately a thousand and five hundred.

She acquired such a number in case a problem were to appear in the large-scaled structure, thanks to that she still had a lot of fighting force left. But she didn't expect she would spend a third of the force on one person.

"Oh well——isn't he about to hit the limit?"

A smile spilled on Aoko's face and she started to walk slowly towards the battlefield.

His thoughts were screaming.

"——Haa!"

He did a roundhouse kick and a cut at the same time. As he turned around he immediately cut the neck of the Black Knight who was behind him.

With nodachi in his hand, Taiga continued to single-mindedly hunt the 《Zygotes》 .

Taiga made the circular area around him his own and continued to cut down any enemy that stepped inside. Renjou Sword Technique Sixth Form 《Enkuu》 . Although at first he didn't allow any enemy to approach him within a two metres radius, he was currently fighting at a distance where they were almost grazing his cheeks.

"Guh...ah...!"

zukin ... a fierce pain ran through him.

Taiga's movement visibly dulled, the hatchets were swung at him from all the sides as enemy saw an opportunity.

He somehow parried it and avoided a mortal blow by dodging but a small cut was engraved on his body.

All of his five senses were blurred as if he had a high fever.

The ringing in his ears continued to increase more and more, he was attacked by a illusion that made him feel as if he was to lose sensation in his fingers.

It's been already seven minutes since he triggered 《Synchro Infinity》, Taiga's body exceeded the limit long time ago. And yet he still continue to fight, driven by his strong will. However, the turnaround of the situation was nowhere in sight.

And then——the time has come.

"_____?!!"

Against his will, force left his knees. At the same time a severe pain incomparable to what he felt hit his entire body, colour was drained from his vision.

"...checkmate."

A quiet declaration. It was the signal.

When Taiga stopped moving two huge hatchets penetrated his shoulders, furthermore his entire back has been slashed.

"Agah...!!!"

The nodachi fell out of Taiga's hands and dropped on the floor with a dry sound.

Although Taiga would normally fall, both of his pierced shoulders locked his body in the air like a model. With his knees on the ground and hung down head he looked like a sinner sentenced and waiting for punishment.

He desperately raised his face while feeling a pain that made it seem like his body was falling apart. His vision was still blurred, yet he still wasn't released as Asumi Aoko pushed through between the black knights.

"You did well to get this far. I didn't think you would withstand this much. You have my honest praise."

"...s..hut...up..."

As Aoko gave him an applause and clapped her hands, he glared at her while releasing killing intent.

He tried to force his body to move, but he felt a throb in his head every time causing his consciousness to recede.

"Good grief, could you not look at me with such eyes?"

Aoko slowly brandished the jet-black scythe.

Although she had a smile on her face, her eyes were cold and didn't show any emotions.

"If you look at me with such impudent eyes... I'll feel like crushing them."

Together with the clear voice, the scythe's blade pierced through Taiga's left eye.

"——GAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH?!!!!"

He screamed.

Ignoring Taiga's screams which were loud enough to tear eardrums, Aoko focused on the scythe in her hands.

With nasty fleshy sounds, the blade entered his back. Feeling a severe pain as if his nerves were torn apart and a discomfort in his head, Taiga continued to scream. If he didn't, he would go crazy.

After a dozen of seconds that felt like forever, the sickle was withdrawn slowly.

If it were reality, pieces of meat would have clung to the blade, but there were none in here. Aoko looked at him satisfied and walked behind him.

"Wa...it... whe...re...are you...going..."

"...that's surprising. You're still conscious."

Aoko made a surprised expression as she heard a low voice he squeezed from his lungs.

Taiga's posture was unchanged, he found Aoko with his remaining eye. Although, his breath was faint and the only thing that kept his consciousness together was his will.

"The rebound from the program should have caused you a fierce pain, I'm amazed about your strength of will. Well, it would have been better for you if you obediently lost consciousness."

A normal human being would have fainted long time ago, no, it wouldn't be weird if they died from shock——that's how painful it was. Aoko has committed a suicide by burning out her brain in the past, she knew a bit about that pain.

She stood in front of Taiga, strongly grabbed his hair and forcibly raised his face. A horrible noise was running through his left eye, but his right eye displayed an unchanged and strong will in it.

So he can still make such eyes.

Aoko admired those eyes a great deal.

Tenryo Taiga no longer had any strength to raise his face.

He couldn't hold his sword nor defeat any Black Knights, he couldn't even dream of stopping Aoko. Were she to swing down her scythe——with just that, his life would have been easily extinguished.

"W..hy...?"

"Nn?"

"...why...would you...betr..ay..Haya...like...that? Isn't...she your best...friend...?"

His voice was quiet enough to disappear carried off by the wind. Aoko looked at the Logic Bomb which slowly expanded above her and released Taiga's hair from her hand.

"The reason huh. Oh well, there's no need to hide it and 《Indra》's generation is slower than estimated so I'll tell you some of it."

Aoko put her fingers on Taiga's forehead.

As she did that a light colour appeared, a scenery Taiga has never seen flowed through his head.

"I implanted some data into your mind. The stimulus might be a little too strong, so try not to break okay?"

Asumi Aoko has become a Hologhost and obtained some freedom in manipulating mental structures. Two week ago, she sealed some of Shio's emotions.

Because she was like that, she could replicate and transfer memories as well. In Taiga's head the memory of the original 'Asumi Aoko' has been imputed.

Those were, gruesome memories.

"In a trade off in exchange for Kiritou Kouya to allow us to develop AI · Iolite, I agreed on developing military programs. That's because that miser wouldn't allow research that wasn't profitable. So I've been made to do such things, I didn't resist it."

A memory was played out, a sight he didn't know appeared and disappeared.

—First, it was just a security program.

He gave her a norm and ordered her to produce, she made things according to his instructions. Legitimate programs like ones used by police. However, Kouya's instructions slowly became more extreme as not to make Aoko too aware of it.

Surveillance cameras, motion sensing, aircraft control systems, the backbone of the Kiritou Headquarters' structure defence system, anti-air defence systems——no one knew as she continued to be entrusted with more and more important work.

"Now that I look back, placing me and partnering me with Haya was a trickery. My senses were clearly paralyzed. Every day I spent with Haya was fun and my recognition of right and wrong has become ambiguous."

That's why she took on the task of developing military programs. If just that much allowed her to research and develop something together with her best friend, she would do it without thinking twice.

"I was reminded of my foolishness three years ago. I was curious how the program I made was used... and learned that it was a murder weapon used in war zones."

In the end, it was something made by a child. It couldn't be all that important.

Those optimistic thoughts of hers were crushed with ease.

She made it. She made a program made to murder people——no, because of her a lot of people died.

"I was in shock. I felt like I fell into the abyss. I knew I no longer had the qualification to live in the light, I reached out to it with regret... and this is the price."

A scene emerged in Taiga's mind.

A season during which cherry blossoms fluttered around, the two girls laughed together while wearing brand new uniforms. The girl who was walking a road full of light and hope for the future was reminded that she was still in hell.

"I didn't say I want to quit. If I stopped my development Kiritou Kouya would have immediately discarded Iolite. Also... my hand was stained with blood a long time ago. That's why, I just did what I could. Even if it was hell."

Even though she knew people would die, she still continued to develop.

She at least resisted when 『Zygote』 and 『Indra』 were in the conceptual stage and destroyed them as high risk programs. She knew well that it was hypocrisy.

"Then one day, a doctor has sentenced me to death."

Life expectancy, six months——it was already too late for treatment.

"Of course I feared death. But even more than that, I was relieved. With that I would be free from this hell, I wanted to use my remaining time for myself... and yet, do you know what that man, Kiritou Kouya thought?"

She thought she will be free by the very end.

For her who was always tied to something, she wanted a bit time for herself. She wanted to go to the bright places along with Haya. It was her last chance. And that—

"——『'Then spit out all the knowledge and skills you have during these remaining six months.'』. The day I was sentenced to live six more months, that man said so."

You are a tool. You will be used until you're broken. Having her remaining time taken away made her feel outraged.

That's when anger, resentment, hatred have flowed into Taiga... excessively strong negative feelings were boiling. It became the root of Asumi Aoko's revenge.

"I'll destroy everything. Kiritou Kouya, and this silly kingdom he made by using me all all all of it will be destroyed not leaving a single piece behind."

"....."

She looked down at Taiga who didn't say anything, Aoko aimed the scythe's blade once again.

No more talking. She will eliminate the nuisance, end him.

"See you, Tenryo Taiga."

The decapitating slash was swung down.

Just as the blade of darkness has been plunged into Taiga's defenceless neck——just before the blade sank in, it stopped.

"——?!"

Aoko's eyes were stained with surprise.

What stopped the scythe, was Taiga's hand which shouldn't have had any will to move.

He gripped the blade with all his strength, it didn't move even though Aoko tried her all.

"...I finally get it."

Taiga murmured quietly and forced himself up.

The hatchets in his shoulders sliced the nerves, a severe pain ran through his entire body. But that was fine.

...it's alike.

He finally found a reason why he recognized Aoko as the enemy the moment he met her.

They were alike, this girl and him. They resembling each other a lot. That's why——he couldn't acknowledge Asumi Aoko.

"...someone has to put an end to it."

"...what?"

mshrr, the sickle Taiga grasped let out a sound.

He forcibly pulled out the hatchet from his shoulders. He didn't feel any pain, and his anger has reached critical point long ago.

"It's not about your suicide. But you know, don't involve your best friend in something that stupid! If you want to die, then die alone!"

Just by shouting his consciousness receded. The severe pain from his crushed left eye felt like poison, his vision was dyed red.

Even so, he didn't fall. He couldn't afford to fall.

There should've been a different path she could have taken.

Be happy according to that path, be fulfilled after choosing that ending. And yet——why would she choose a path on which no one would be saved.

He didn't approve of such a story. He didn't approve of such an outcome.

Tenryo Taiga bet everything he had, as he absolutely needed to change this ending.

"Such a wasteful story——right here, right now. I'll put an end to it!"

He stared straight in front of him and declared.

Tenryo Taiga will deny Asumi Aoko——that was the meaning embedded in these words.

"...hee."

Aoko tried to shake off Taiga's hand and hit the ground lightly with the scythe's handle.

With that the 《Zygotes》 activated and surrounded him.

"I don't really get what you're saying... but I can understand that you want to continue fighting with me. But are you going to do it with such a worn out body?"

It was just as Aoko said, Taiga had wounds all over his body. Although it wasn't damage that could be called critical, but it was a miracle he was still standing.

"Suuu....haaa..."

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

Again and again, deeper and deeper, he did it countless times.

With his breathing came pain, it swallowed his feelings and roused the instinct inside his consciousness.

"...it's been two months since I last intended to kill a person."

He went back in time.

Reawakening 'himself' from the time before reunited with her.



He slowly opened his eyes, in the sky-blue pupils dwelled an unwavering will.

"——Let's start, Asumi Aoko."

That moment, Aoko felt a thirst for blood which made her blood freeze.

While feeling a horrifying sensation grabbing her heart she lost the mental battle, she snapped her fingers.

"Get him!"

As they were ordered to, the Black Knights kicked off the ground and jumped.

Taiga kicked up the nodachi that was lying on the ground with his foot——and he vanished.

He reappeared few metres away right before a materializing Black Knight and lightly swung his fist. The blow that shouldn't have hit anything has captured the assaulting Black Knight's head from the right side and pulverized it.

"—— 《Raijuji》 "

In no time he twisted his body and released a lightning fast double attack.

The Black Knight's armour was decomposed in an instant. Aiming at Taiga the moment he still hasn't changed his posture, dozens of Black Knights rushed at him——and they exploded with a flash.

With a speed that made it look hazy, the blade has drawn multiple slashes in an instant. Unable to wield their hatchets any longer, the Black Knights became wreckage.

"HAAAaa!!!!"

It wasn't a fighting style driven by anger like the one he used earlier.

These were sophisticated movements without any waste, a refined way of fighting which purely dedicated his movements to destroying the target.

...calm down, he's just using a way of fighting that won't put a burden on his body. Tenryo Taiga reached his limit long time ago. There's no element that would make me lose.

Aoko analysed the situation calmly.

No matter what he said, the damage to his body didn't disappear.

There was no way his brain would recover from a fatigue that made him fall over once already——she knew that.

But what is this feeling?

One of his eyes was crushed. His body was cut up. His trump card 《Synchro Infinity》 already passed its limit.

Asumi Aoko couldn't win against Tenryo Taiga——such a baseless thought was stuck in her head and wouldn't leave.

He soared with a flash.

It was as if everything other than him was in slow motion, the Black Knights were trampled over not even having a chance to counter-attack. At a speed that couldn't be followed with eyes, sometimes he crushed them with his body, sometimes he cut them up, and continued to reduce their numbers.

"——!! Adding body connection path, continuous transition!"

When she returned to herself, Aoko added another summoning point, doubling it.

A dull pain hit her because of the sudden load, a mass of Zygotes which transferred from another large-scale structure attacked Taiga.

——He sped up even more?!"

But, even so, they didn't reach him.

Rather than grow dull, Taiga's movements became faster and sharper. He cut up the Black Knights in a blink of an eye.

Witnessing that sight, Aoko realized.

——Until this boy defeats himself, he will never fall. He had no bounds, he would become infinitely strong.

"...! What is... this?"

Unexpectedly, an unknown memory appeared in her mind.

Happily walking with his parents and little sister, a large truck plunging towards her. The siblings who ran escaped, the dying parents.

It's not my memory... did the circuitry have a rebound?

The electronic circuits planted Taiga's memory in her.

Although it was supposed to be the other way around, Tenryo Taiga's memory, the strongest one among them flowed into Aoko.

——A young boy who lost everything.

Separated by death with his parents, and torn away from his remaining little sister.

Even so he tried to live and face forward. If there was next time, he swore to himself to become strong enough in body and mind so that he could protect what was precious to him then.

However, the boy was weak.

He was adopted by a military clan. A complete amateur was given the last name of the head family. It resulted with him being bullied, he was beaten up and ragged down every day.

But the boy endured and put in a desperate effort. If he becomes strong enough he'll find the place he belongs to——he believed in that. And eventually found it.

However, soon enough he was chased away from it. It was simple. While there were people who didn't acknowledge weakness, there were also people who hated strong people. In the boy's case, it was the people of Renjou's main family.

Strength is everything. That was the iron law of Renjou. If the boy continues to grow at this rate, he will deprive us of the family head's seat——they feared that happening, and sent the nine year old boy to the battlefield. They hoped and prayed for his death.

His memories from the past were gruesome enough to make her want to turn away, they were full of blood and death.

Kill or be killed. Under such an abnormal environment he killed for the first time, he wasn't given any time to repent. He made eye contact with people as he killed killed killed and continued to kill them.

How many hundreds, how many thousands. He sowed death.

He continued to circle around battlefields accustomed to death, stained with blood, he became a human who robbed people of their lives without any hesitation.

And one day, after three years from the moment he first killed——he noticed that he thought nothing of his parents death and despaired.

He bore hatred for everything.

The environment that drove him to that point, he thought of killing all the folks who made him like that.

And yet, he stopped himself from doing that.

Let's live together one day——the only family he had left, in order to protect the promise with his little sister, the boy discarded hatred.

".....don't fuck with me."

Glimpsing into that memory, Aoko murmured dumbfounded.

It was the same.

Deprived of their place to stay, living a life while being treated like a tool. And—accumulating a multitude of sins, yet still reaching towards the light.

The only difference was the result. He discarded the hatred, she decided on having revenge.

"———!!!!"

She clenched her teeth strongly until they creaked.

I won't acknowledge it. Just this boy, she absolutely couldn't acknowledge his existence—it was nothing as simple as cognate aversion, a searing anger was born deep within her.

"All individuals... Armour Create!"

Driven by rage, she cried out towards the heaven.

The Black Knights who were fighting against Taiga turned back to miasma and wrapped around Aoko.

The miasma covered her torso and limbs before crystallizing, changing into a darkness-coloured armour. Aoko grasped an atrocious scythe with an over one metre blade in one hand and swung it.

Aoko became a mass of murderous intent and glared at him, Taiga responded her squarely.

"Why... you're the same, even though you are the same as me!!"

"——Come. Cut that out and let's finish this."

"WHY IS IT ONLY YOU STAYING IN THE LIGHTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTT!!!"

The two kicked off the ground at the same time and clashed with a loud roar.

Part 3

At about the same time as Taiga and Aoko engaged each other in a deadly battle. In the special structure prepared by Aoko, the 『Prison』, the cyber warfare was about to reach its imminent conclusion.

"Cut it out, how about you give up."

The defence program Aoko prepared——『Angel』stared at Fuyuki soberly.

"Haa... haa...!!"

Fuyuki didn't answer. No, she couldn't afford to answer would be more correct.

The number of attacks they exchanged reached three digits. A countless number of attack-configured programs has been created. Once she even created a hundred of them at once. And yet, it was all in vain.

Angel looked down at Fuyuki as she exhaled roughly and spoke quietly.

"I've told you earlier, I have no intention of harming you. And yet, why do you continue that despite knowing you can't win? It's hard to understand."

No matter what she does she couldn't surpass Angel who received the backup of the main server, a smart girl like her should know it.

And yet, she didn't give up.

"...it's because, you showed me, such a video...!"

Fuyuki answered while catching her breath.

What she was shown, was Taiga being cut by numerous Black Knights, as well as him having his left eye pierced with a scythe. After being shown such a thing, there was no way she could stay calm.

"Because of such emotions which last only for a moment you repeat your pointless resistance. Truly pointless."

The Angel laughed and described her resistance as 'foolish'.

"There's a limit to how much one person can do. You can't defeat me, that reality won't change no matter how hard you try, that's the absolute truth."

This single girl who seemed to be stuck in this hell until she died.

And after living that silly life, she arrived at a single truth. Her hatred concentrated in these words.

"...are you an idiot?"

Fuyuki discarded it all with a single word.

"——What?"

"People have limits? Nothing will change no matter how hard they try? Even if you say that. That's not a reason to give up is it."

Tenryou Fuyuki understood she was a highly eccentric human being.

The only thing she had was her technical skills in cyber technology. She was bad at sports and exercise, she didn't possess the necessary skills required for everyday life. Also, she was fragile mentally.

She was supported by Taiga and Rui as well as Shio, and became able to live a decent life.

"If it's impossible alone then do it with two people. If it's impossible with two people then do it with three people. When Little Sister was in pain, Brother supported her. That's why, when Brother is in pain his little sister must support him. 'Impossible' or 'it can't be done' has nothing to do with it."

She separated the words with small pauses during which she took small breaths every time.

"Before giving up one has resist with all their strength, That's what Little Sister thinks."

"...!"

These words as if seeing through it, have pierced Aoko's heart which was dwelling in Angel's chest.

—What do you know about me.

Fuyuki and I are different.

There was someone who reached out to her. Aoko didn't have such a person.

Resist what. You are just blessed, that's all——!!

"——I didn't intend to harm you, but I changed my mind."

Driven by fury it clamped on Fuyuki's neck. In its hand was a red light——a military program which captured the mental structure 《Jail》 .

"You'll die here."

There was no hesitation, at this rate 《Jail》 would steal her mental structure and fuel 《Indra》 ——yes, it was then.

Suddenly, power left Angel's body.

"Wh...at...?"

clank, it collapsed on its knees. Its body became as heavy as lead for some reason. The 《Jail》 could no longer be maintained and melted away into the air. And it heard the voice of a third party that wasn't (shouldn't be) in there.

⟨"Nnn... can it be that we barely made it in time?"⟩

⟨"Hime-chan, you all right?"⟩

"Yes. Nice timing, Rucchan, Shii-chan."

Angel forced its face up and stared at the two girls reflected on the window.

"Saionji Rui, Karasuba Shio... why those girls——no, rather than that, what did you do?!"

Its body was heavy to an impossible extent. This state, it seemed like its processing area wasn't enough to make it move.

That's when it looked towards the huge sphere that was behind the two girls.

"——It can't be."

"Yes it can."

Unlike how it was before, Fuyuki slowly rose up and looked down on Angel.

"You are getting support from the main server. That means your circuits are connected with it. But that also works in reverse and if the load from the server is directed to you, you won't be able to do anything."

What Fuyuki sent to Rui and Shio were coordinates of the main server. And with a plan message 'please access the main server and reverse all vector operations' she instructed them.

Honestly, she didn't know whether they will manage to do it in time——but they splendidly accomplished it.

"Kuh... I've been... by someone like you...!"

"You are an amazing programmer. Were Little Sister to be alone, there would be nothing she could do."

Through Angel, she spoke to the program's author.

Not only did it borrowed computing power from the server, acted autonomously but also had its own will. The current Fuyuki would faster make a handstand before making something like that. But——

"...Little Sister isn't alone. That's the reason for your defeat."

She shot blue crystals towards Angel and disassembled the program. Within a few seconds Angel disappeared not leaving a single piece behind.

"...you two, I'll head over there right now. Make sure you prepare to move."

Fuyuki looked towards where Angel was for a moment and then after entering the coordinates of the main server she used 《Transition》 .

Part 4

"Uuu..."

Hit by a shock wave and trembling air, Haya woke up.

The sound of metal crossing again and again pierced through her eardrums, her consciousness slowly became lucid.

"Koho... ha... kua..."

Because of a foreign sensation in her belly she started coughing. Her blurred vision caught a trajectory of white and black objects which yelled. She slowly looked up and saw Taiga and Aoko clash against each other.

It was a clash of two souls.

Both of them unleashed speed which surpassed the limit and dozens of their attacks crossed. The two blades clashed and an invisible shock wave destroyed everything around them.

"UUUUOOOOOOOOOOOOOOoooooo!!!"

"UUUUAAAAAAAaaa!!!!"

With every blow that roared, the world was cracking.

The power of the two rose infinitely. Taiga was drawing strength from within himself, Aoko continued to evolve by absorbing 『Zygotes』 .

Neither of them would acknowledge the other——that was the driving force for both of them.

While they traveled the path of sin together, they still longed for the light. They didn't give up, they desperately extended their hands to it.

Tenryo Taiga managed to grasp it. He chose to escape to the person who would accept him.

Asumi Aoko didn't grasp it. She couldn't speak of her suffering to anyone, and sank into the abyss.

If I were to make a choice like that then——they found what was the correct and the incorrect answer, and Aoko felt the road she has walked on was meaningless.

That's why Tenryo Taiga and Asumi Aoko bet everything and fought.

The two forcibly clashed, it was strong enough to blow away each other ten metres away.

Although Taiga wanted to rebuild his posture and run, a fierce pain ran through his whole body making him kneel.

"Ga———ha——aa...a..."

His heart ached, the anchor holding his consciousness was fading.

He went past his limit a long time ago. Taiga moved his broken body forcibly not allowing himself to be defeated.

As he desperately looked up, he saw Aoko crouch and hold her head.

"Haa... haa... aghhh!!"

Even though Aoko boasted of her extraordinary processing power, absorbing hundreds of 『Zygotes』 put an immeasurable load on her. Her thinking circuits would collapse were she to fight any longer.

Even so, the two stood up.

"I, won't lose... I will destroy everything... and end it... I won't lose at a place...like this"

"Give me a break you spoiled kid... to the very end you haven't fucking done anything at all!"

Taiga roared strongly. In front of him was 'himself who made a mistake'——that's why he couldn't acknowledge her.

"You neither fought it nor escaped, you just let the circumstances take you away! Scared of changes, scared of being rejected, you shouldered everything alone!"

"...shut up."

"With just one phrase 'help me' your life would have been saved! You selfishly plunged yourself into despair because you couldn't say that!"

"Shut up..."

"You just wanted to be beside someone! You just wanted someone to reach out to you! Both you, and we, would be happy with just thaaaaaaAAAAAAAAT!!!"

"SHUT UPPPPPPPPP!!!!!!

The nodachi and the scythe crossed again.

The cries of heart of the two reached Haya who was lying down.

"Ao...ko..."

She muttered the name of her best friend and cursed herself.

———Why am I sleeping in a place like this.

Haya noticed. She knew Asumi Aoko was being troubled by something, she knew Aoko continued to suffer. But despite noticing, she couldn't do anything.

She was scared.

For the girl called Kiritou Haya, Kiritou Kouya was absolute. That's why the girl who was cornered by her father pretended as if she didn't know anything. She did so that she wouldn't get hurt.

...in the end, I was just suiting myself.

Were she to extend a helping hand back then, Aoko might have lived a happy life.

Without going for stupid revenge, she could live her life and leave the world with a smile on her face——such a regret occupied Haya's mind.

I must... go...

After exerting strength with both of her arms she raised her body.

She had to stop her best friend who went down the wrong road.

It couldn't be anyone else, she had to finish that girl's story with her own hands. It was her duty to end that girl's derailed life.

With determination filling her chest, in order to bring down the curtains she started walking towards the battlefield.

How many times have they clashed.

The two didn't know the exact number themselves. The slashes crossed countless number of times and the two continued to be blown away.

"Haa... haa..."

They continued to breathe irregularly and somehow stood up.

Both of them were clearly at their limit. They literally put a desperate effort into this fierce battle, they could no longer feel pain nor fatigue.

Without even a need to say it they knew it——next one, was the last.

Neither of them spoke.

The time to talk was over. What they could do, was only to celebrate the end of the battle.

clank, a sound of something swaying could be heard.

""——!!!!""

It was a signal, the white and black flashed at the same time.

The nodachi slashed Aoko's body and the scythe stabbed into Taiga's belly.

As the two went beyond their limits the blades of their weapons broke and rolled on the ground.

After a few seconds of rest.

".....sh...it..."

The one who fell——was Tenryo Taiga.

He lost strength in his body after swinging his sword and plunged forward, he couldn't move any more.

His consciousness seemed to remain. His fingertips moved trying to struggle. However, that was all. Taiga couldn't raise his body.

Seeing the enemy she has defeated Aoko quietly laughed.

"...how unfortunate, isn't it."

Both their attack power and speed were equal. If they were to fight against each other in a perfect state, Taiga would have won thanks to the combat experience he had.

What decided his defeat was the accumulated damage.

From the very beginning Taiga was fighting by using his own body, different from Aoko who cornered him using her pawns.

⟨"Mental structure synthesis complete. Logic Bomb 《Indra》 generation sequence process completed."⟩

As she looked up into the air an inorganic announcement came, the giant star made out of ten thousand absorbed mental structures shined like a sun. All that was left was to say 'fall' and this world would have been turned into dust.

"With this, it's all ov———.....er...?"

She tried to move her finger in order to accomplish her objective that's when. *thud*, something hit her back.

An unpleasant sensation came from her chest and her limbs lost their strength. When she frightfully looked towards it, she saw the blade of the nodachi which was broken off earlier protrude from her left breast.

"...I'm sorry Aoko. I can't let your objective come true."

"Ha...ya..."

She muttered the name of her best friend who pierced her from behind, a cold sensation came from her left breast which had a hole in it. The sensation slowly spread throughout her body, and her senses faded.

I'm... dying...?

Her body temperature, the warm of life was dissipating.

Strangely clear, she could hear the sound of her own breathing, it was becoming more and more shallow.

"N...o..."

—Once again, she will go back to that place.

A place where light doesn't reach, a dark and cold place, she was to go there alone. She still hasn't accomplished anything.

A silly and ridiculous ending like this, for what sake has betrayed her best friend and clung to her life.

If she died here and now, the life of Asumi Aoko,

Would be meaningless—

Worth...less—

Asumi Aoko let out a scream putting spitting a curse that would destroy anything.

The powerful emotions she lost control of flowed through the 《Zygote》 which infested her body, the star of doom in the sky started to slowly fall down. The Black Knights which turned into an immobile armour turned back into a muddy stream and flowed to swallow Haya.

That moment Taiga raised a war cry as if to order his body 'move' and jumped into the contamination.

He desperately broke through the darkness which wrapped around her body, he pulled her powerless arms out the miasma.

"Geho...gouh... Haya! Hey! Pull yourself together!"

".....Tai...ga?"

Since she was limp he kept slapping her cheeks, finally she reacted and returned.

She stared at Taiga with unfocused gaze, but soon enough she understood what was the situation. She tried to get up in a hurry, but her body didn't listen to her and was unsteady.

"What about Aoko...?"

"Above. We were washed away and are about ten floors below."

As she looked up, she saw Aoko far above. But that wasn't all there was.

The Logic Bomb «Indra» was slowly crushing the building, slowly but surely it was falling.

The walls and rooms continued to become meaningless data the instant it touched them, the giant star continued to expand as it absorbed it.

"It's GAME OVER if that reaches the bottom. We'll be all done for. That's troubling."

"It's not time to take this leisurely! Now that it's been activated even destroying Aoko won't stop it! We need to hurry and do something——"

"Yeah, you're right. That's why I'll do something about it. You should hurry and go back to the top."

"Eh...?"

"——This time end it properly. Her story."

That's your role, he said as he stared straight at Haya.

Haya stared back at his pupils and responded with a small nod.

"I'll leave it to you."

"Yeah, leave it to me."

That was enough.

She forced her legs to move and went up the stairs. Taiga looked as she slowly disappeared and jumped down from the terrace.

"There we... go."

He killed the momentum by kicking off the wall and nearly instantly arrived at the first floor.

It was a soft landing with almost no shock dealt to him, his body passed its limit long time ago. His consciousness was fading away simply by moving his limbs, his entire body screamed.

"Now then. I said 'leave it to me'... but what do I do."

He looked up at the giant light that was gradually looming down and murmured.

Although he wanted to do something, 『Heavenly Sword』 was broken. He had no choice but to let Haya go, and alone he couldn't do anything.

Still, he tried to do something alone. It was at that time.

⟨"Brother! Are you safe?!"⟩

A window opened in front of him and Fuyuki's voice sounded at the same time.

"Fuyuki! You're safe, that's great!"

⟨ "Thanks to Rucchan and Shii-chan I somehow managed. And Brother... seems to be in a dangerous situation." ⟩

"Rui and Shio? They came?"

⟨ "Yes. We're together in the server room now. Rather than that, we will remove the barrier right now, please log out immediately!" ⟩

Understanding the situation on his side, Fuyuki's eyes looked towards the falling 《Indra》. Judging from her expression, it must've been really bad. But——

"...no. I can't do that."

He couldn't run away alone.

Unable to believe his words, Fuyuki cried out as blood drained out of her face.

⟨ "Brother, what are you saying?! Don't you know how horrifying that is?!" ⟩

"I do understand."

⟨ "Then——" ⟩

"...I promised that I'll do something about that."

The one he promised with was no longer there. Still——the little girl disappeared relieved after he promised her that.

That's why, he couldn't run away. If he did, he would betray her trust.

There was determination in his pupils, Fuyuki sighed and seemed like she was about to cry.

⟨ "...haa. Really, you continue to trouble people don't you. It would be fine to just leave it." ⟩

"Sorry."

⟨ "But... that's the Brother I fell in love with." ⟩

She wiped the corners of her eyes, and determination appeared in her eyes.

Fuyuki waved her hand, and the attack-configured program 《Heavenly Sword》 which should have been destroyed appear beside Taiga.

⟨ "Little Sister made a back-up. Brother needs to plunge it straight into the nucleus in the Logic Bomb's centre. It'll end with that." ⟩

"Got it."

He didn't need to know the reason nor principle behind that.

She told him to plunge it in. All that was left was to believe her and do it.

"——I'm going!"

Taiga gained momentum and leaped while pulling the nodachi. He rushed towards the giant shining star.

Part 5

"Rucchan, please direct all the server's computing power to Little Sister. Shii-chan, cut off the connection with all other structures!"

"On it!

"U-understood!"

In Kiritou headquarters' server room, Fuyuki gave out one instruction after another.

Fuyuki operated the console with a furious speed and aggregated all the processing power of the main server, she used all of it to back the 『Heavenly Sword』 that was in Taiga's possession.

A Logic Bomb was causing errors by dumping a huge amount of information that was impossible to process. In other words, the errors don't occur if the information is processed.

The method Fuyuki intended to use was simple. She used Kiritou's main server and she collected all the processing power in 『Heavenly Sword』 to process the information the moment nucleus was being destroyed.

"Thank you very much, you two. Leave the rest to Little Sister."

After saying that to Rui and Shio Fuyuki continued to single-mindedly hit the console.

"....."

Shio quietly stared at Fuyuki's back. It seemed very, very distant to her.

"Fuyuki's amazing. We can't do such a thing."

Before Shio noticed, Rui standing beside her spoke to her. Shio didn't answer, she only stared at Fuyuki who worked in silence.

"Frustrating, isn't it. Taiga and Fuyuki are doing their best, and we can't do anything."

"...Rui-chan feels so too?"

"That's right. I know Fuyuki is special, but it's still frustrating."

Rui's words pierced through Shio's heart.

She knew their talents were different. And yet she still felt irritated as she was unable to do anything.

"...but you see. Rui-san thinks that's fine."

"Eh...?"

"Both Taiga and Fuyuki, they live in a different world from Rui-san. But.. the place those two really want to be in, is this all-too-ordinary world of ours."

That's why, it was fine like this.

After all's over, she'll greet them with a smile——it was fine with just that.

"....."

Shio closed her eyes quietly.

Somehow——she finally could see a glimpse of the road she should follow.

Part 6

"Haa...! Ha...!"

She ran up the stairs.

Her feet passed their limit long ago, she fell down many times already. Still, Haya stood up and continued to run towards the top floor.

What occupied her mind, was the expression Aoko made right before she was swallowed by the muddy stream.

Her best friend was terrified of extinction, feared death. Her real face was weak and fragile.

...one year ago, she made such an expression when I couldn't see it?

Scared, in pain, her heart was almost crushed. She held down the feelings she couldn't do anything about. Frightened that her remaining life was slowly running out, and despite that, something she couldn't forgive remained. She decided to kill herself and have revenge——that showed just in how much anguish she was in.

As to not to allow that to repeat, Haya continued running while thinking she couldn't allow Aoko to be alone. And——she found her collapsed and crying like a small child.

"...uu....u...aa..."

"...Aoko."

What was there, wasn't a demon of vengeance that annihilated Kiritou all alone. It was a tiny girl terrified of death.

Her virtual body was at the limit of endurance and began collapsing already, particles of light continued to spill from her body.

As Haya took a step closer. Through the particles of light, Aoko's feelings flowed.

—She thought it would be better to have lived alone.

Asumi Aoko's existence wouldn't be acknowledged by anyone, she would die miserably discarded like garbage in a place where the light of sun didn't reach.

But she has met the light named Kiritou Haya, and learned what was comfort.

If it was her old self, she would have been able to stand the loneliness. But after experiencing the warmth, it made her feel even colder now.

She no longer was strong enough to withstand loneliness.

No... I am the one who weakened Aoko.

The floor gradually collapsed.

The building was slowly turning into a slope, she staggered almost losing balance. Still, Haya continued to walk—and gently hugged the kneeling girl.



"Ha...ya...?"

"...sorry. I didn't notice. Even though I was the one who dragged you through it... I couldn't protect you."

She arbitrarily decided and was under impression that the talented girl was someone strong.

Haya made a mistake that she was strong enough to live alone. The truth was, that she was weaker than anyone, and desired connection with people more than anyone.

"...I'm scared, Haya... I don't want to be cold any more..."

"Nn, I got it. I'll be with you until the end. You'll be warm like that, right?"

The floor collapsed, Haya fell down while holding Aoko.

《Indra》 was looking down on them, it shone and swallowed everything, destroying it. At this rate both of them will——

...well, that's fine. Such a conclusion isn't bad either.

Immediately after Haya closed her eyes, a sky blue glow filled the sky.

Part 7

What Taiga felt after he entered Indra, was warmth.

Covering his entire body was a temperature that made his body feel comfortable and took away the senses in his body.

This is——not——goo...d——

If it was pain, he could put up with it. But this was out of question.

All the damage he received and fatigue he accumulated entered the gaps of his heart, he couldn't shake them off.

A mental structure of ten thousand people, the souls which lost their bodies clung to Taiga's virtual body as if saying 'give it to me' and cut off his nerve connections.

It stalled him in the air.

Leave your body to this warmth. It'll be comfortable——he almost drowned in the temptation, that's when.

〈———I'll lend you a hand. Come, it's over here dammit."〉

He heard a horribly nostalgic voice. It reached out to him.

In the white haze he couldn't feel any directions, he relied on her voice and followed her.

"...Iora."

〈"It's been a friggin week hasn't it, Taiga."〉

A small body that fits in one hand, transparent blue hair. Although her face was the same as Asumi Aoko's, her tone was weird and rude——it was the AI • Iolite.

"You, why... Aoko said you disappeared..."

〈"I escaped right before that happened. Rather than that, is your damn body all right now?"〉

"Body? Now that you say it..."

He suddenly noticed that the pleasant sensation disappeared, his blurred five senses returned to normal. With the fatigue and pain which returned to his body he could still withstand this.

⟨ "I moved the other mental structures away. I bought you some time like this." ⟩

"...since when were you here?"

⟨ "When 《Indra》 was generated I escaped from Master Aoko seeing a chance to interfere. An AI also has a mental structure so... in the end, I could only delay its completion." ⟩

"So you did such a thing."

⟨ "Yes. Just as I promised, I continued my futile resistance." ⟩

As she said that, a smile spilled on Iora's face.

The promise she made with Taiga——honestly to a fault, she tried to fulfill it.

"I see... cheers for your hard work."

She believed that Taiga would come and stop it. Just by believing in it, she could continue struggling.

⟨ "Taiga came to destroy the nucleus right?" ⟩

"Yeah. To end this pointless revenge——that's what I came here for."

⟨ "Then... you know what to do right?" ⟩

Iora looked straight at him, he silently nodded.

Rather than theorizing, he knew it instinctively. It was the centre of the Logic Bomb, the origin that pieced together a ten thousand mental structures. And that the girl right in front of him——

"You're the nucleus, aren't you."

⟨ "...yes." ⟩

It was something that had to be cut.

⟨ "Please don't make such a face, Taiga." ⟩

Iora looked at Taiga who hung his head, she laughed quietly.

⟨"Iora is originally an artificial existence, nobody will be hurt if she disappears. If so many lives are to be saved thanks to that, that's a damn great thing."⟩

"I can't categorize it so easily, I'm not too smart."

Iora looked into Taiga's pupils as if to admonish him. But Taiga wasn't convinced by her words.

Even so, there was no other way besides destroying her, he understood it to a painful extent. That's why he put a hand on the nodachi hanging by his waist.

⟨"...thank you."⟩

"I don't have a right to be told that by someone whom I'm about to destroy. Rather than that, let me ask you something."

⟨"What is it dammit?"⟩

"...you, are you Asumi Aoko?"

Taiga was somehow confident as he asked that question. Iora was surprised for a moment, but soon after she smiled softly and stared back at him.

⟨"Why do you think so?"⟩

"There's no solid reason for that. It's just a hunch."

⟨"...that's just like you."⟩

With a faint smile, Iora answered.

⟨"...the answer is YES, and NO. When Master Aoko was lurking in Iora's body as a Hologhost, she has thrown away some feelings that were in the way of her revenge like compassion and kindness. Part of them were absorbed into the artificial intelligence—that's what happened according to Iora's analysis."⟩

"I see..."

The remaining feelings Asumi Aoko's had for Kiritou Haya——that kind of thing.

When he looked below, he saw something like a thin haze approach him slowly. Iora's interference was approaching its limit.

"...it's about time for farewell, Iora."

⟨"...yes. Goodbye."⟩

Iora took a step away, she spread out her arms holding out her body in front. Taiga slowly lowered his body and put a hand on the nodachi's hilt.

"..... „Secret Technique“ first form"

Taiga closed his eyes and took a deep breath, concentrating.

Right now he will destroy a personality, he will take a life——in order to never forget this sin, he engraved it in his heart.

His feet released all the strength, he concentrated on the arms holding the nodachi and pulled out the blade at godspeed while taking a step forward!!

"————— 《Haryuu》 !!!!"

An enormous amount of light overflowed together with the slash, it swallowed the small girl.

⟨"...thank you for stopping me, Taiga."⟩

With that, everything was over.

Epilogue - The Proof She Once Lived

Part 1

Before she knew it, Haya was already awake.

"....."

What she saw in front of her with a dim vision, was a pure white ceiling. She heard a regular electronic beeping and the sound of pure white curtains swayed by the wind.

"...heaven's quite bleak isn't it."

"Leave sleep talk for when you're asleep. A woman like you won't die so easily."

When she turned her head in shock, she found Tenryo Taiga's figure in plain clothes seated on a folding chair. He held both of his hands behind his head and looked outside through the window as if he was in daze.

"Before you ask. This is Kiritou general hospital's VIP room. Want to know your condition?"

"...please."

"Okay. Although there is no trauma, there seem to be quite a large psychological damage. In the worst case, you might have not awakened. It's great it took only a week."

"A week... so I slept that long."

She turned towards the opened window while still lying down. She marked this day as 'one week passed since that day'.

On that day——Haya hugged the disappeared Aoko as the Indra fell on them.

She determined herself to disappear along with that woman.

But immediately after the giant light hit the two, everything was filled with sky blue colour——and she lost her consciousness.

Here I thought I was invited to the other world... but I persistently survived haven't I.

In the end, Kiritou Haya let Asumi Aoko go there alone.

That was the conclusion. No one was saved, a futile ending.

"Now then. Haya, you might not be feeling the best after waking up, but listen to me."

And Taiga spoke to her about what she should know.

The ten thousand mental structures with composed 《Indra》 went back to their original bodies on the same day.

The 'Kiritou' was one of four major cyber-related corporations, were it become to be public the damage would be immeasurable. The negative effects of 《Jail》 caused Kiritou Kouya as well as the executives to have only vague memories of the incident and it was further buried in the darkness.

The world didn't change, Kiritou continued to be one corner of the four major corporations. It was as if the girl called Asumi Aoko didn't exist right from the beginning.

"...I see."

When Haya heard the story from Taiga she suffered from negative emotions and hug her head. Seeing the suicidal expression Taiga let out a small sigh.

"I saved you after going through a lot of trouble. Be more happy."

"...there's no way I can do that can I. In the end, I didn't give anything to neither Aoko nor Iora... maybe I should have acted differently."

If only she questioned Kouya earlier. If only she noticed that Aoko was inside of Iora earlier. If only she discovered 『Angel』's identity earlier. ——Such regrets occupied her mind.

"...it might sound cruel, but Asumi Aoko would reach happiness. She lost her life a year ago. Even if she turned into a ghost, the past wouldn't change."

The moment she turned herself into a Hologhost to have her revenge, she stepped on a road from which she couldn't be saved.

The only thing the two of them could do was to stop her by force. If not, it would have reached the worst conclusion.

Taiga opened the terminal window, and displayed data in front of Haya.

"That's...?"

"It seems like Asumi Aoko's diary. Fuyuki found it in the server room."

Haya turned the pages around frantically.

From the day she was picked up by Kiritou until the day prior to her suicide. Her anguish, hatred as well as all the contents of the plan were written there in detail. She slowly read it all.

"Aoko..."

"It's just my selfish imagination but... she wanted someone to stop her. If she only cared about her objective, there would be no need to leave this diary behind. Moreover, were it to be found the plan would be ruined."

It was a wishful thinking that saved her, even if just a little bit.

Taiga himself knew very well that there was no basis for it.

"...yeah, I think so too."

However, Haya decided to believe his words.

Aoko suffered badly and decided to take revenge, and to this diary she entrusted her only hope. As she was about to take the final step, that's what she must have thought.

Time flowed in silence.

An uncomfortable atmosphere drifted in room, after five minutes passed with the two who didn't know what to say. Unexpectedly, a quiet electronic sound came from Taiga's terminal.

"Oh, it's finally here. Nice timing, Fuyuki."

"What, you look strangely happy. Got some good news?"

"Yeah. She says she finally found a hidden treasure in Kiritou."

When Haya tilted her head puzzled, Taiga executed a program he was sent by Fuyuki. The built-in projector in the terminal activated and displayed a girl in the hospital room.

She had refined and clean facial features, as well as long bluish-black hair.

Clad in a fantastic fluttering costume like a fairy from fairy tales, a girl who looked exactly like Asumi Aoko——AI • Iolite was there.

"...w..hy...?"

"It's Iora's virtual body that Aoko was using. I asked them if it was possible to restore the body somehow. Fuyuki and the others recovered the wrecked data picking it up one by one. But we couldn't do much about her mind."

They dug through an enormous amount of data that was destroyed by Logic Bomb 『Indra』 and reconstructed the body by sorting the data, it was a tremendous amount of work. But the three agreed to do it without any complaints.

Haya raised her body and reached out to Iora who had her eyes closed and wouldn't budge. It was a three-dimensional image so it couldn't be touched. It was just an empty shell without a soul, so there was no reaction.

Even so, Haya continued to stroke her time after time. She pulled out a virtual personality from her own terminal and incorporated it in her.

"...activate."



She gave Iora a push with his fingertips.

After that, a few windows were expanded and an inorganic voice leaked from her mouth.

⟨"Start-up code confirmed. Reading virtual personality start. Connecting information collection from five senses... complete. Memory database generation... complete. AI • Iolite starting in initial state."⟩

Slowly she opened her eyes.

It was the same as when they first met, cold eyes which didn't project any emotions found Haya, with a business tone completely unlike her she spun words.

⟨"Nice to meet you. I am an AI program called 『Iolite』 . I would like to proceed with master registration, will this miss become my master?"⟩

"Nice to meet you, huh... I've been prepared for this, but it is quite hard."

"Haya..."

The memory didn't return after inserting a new virtual personality. Aoko who created Iolite together with her wouldn't come back——she knew that. But the girl still had some hope, she could be called weak.

⟨"I'm sorry... because of me being timid I have broke miss' heart... I'm really sorry."⟩

She repeated repentance time after time, tears flowed quietly down Haya's cheeks. Iolite's inorganic eyes stared at her and——

⟨"——I was happy being together with Master. Thank you very much."⟩

She said words that should be impossible for her.

"Eh...?"

Haya, as well as Taiga have stared at her in disbelief.

Impossible. Iora's virtual personality disappeared completely. She shouldn't have remembered.

"I-Iolite... just now...?"

⟨ "...I do not know. For some reason. When I see Master shed tears, I absolutely need to convey it... that's the feeling I get. There's a possibility of a bug."⟩

"...it's not... a bug."

Really not knowing, AI • Iolite tilted her neck.

Haya wiped the teardrops which collected in the corner of her eyes, looked into her eyes and said as if praying.

"You're fine like that. You can remain as you are."

⟨ "Understood. Master."⟩

After confirming her state Iolite nodded and was sucked into Haya's terminal. While staring at the disappearing after glow, Haya declared.

"Taiga... I have decided. From now on I will forever pursue the dream I had with Aoko. I will develop an AI who can become friends with people. No matter how many years it will take, definitely."

"...I see."

There was a very difficult road in front of her.

But she will never give up. Even without any proof of that, Taiga was confident about it. One day, she will definitely achieve——

"Why are you talking as if it doesn't concern you? You're doing it with me."

"Ha?"

He didn't understand what she meant, seeing him like that Haya made a grand smile.

"Because I'll be graduating starting from next year, you'll be my first employee. Congratulations, there isn't many people who get a job offer on their first year~."

"Wait wait! The talk leaped far too forward!"

"But isn't it quite a good offer? With your grades it's impossible to enter cyber-related companies and you probably won't be able to stand working in a normal company will you. Impossible. Instead, I could use you well."

"Use... you..."

"And if I hire you then I'll be able to catch Fuyuki-san and Saionji-san as well. I'll get the top student of first year as well as the runner up? It's not easy to get such high quality staff."

"So that's your real aim!"

Taiga started panicking because of the sudden development, Haya looked at this with a happy smile on her face.

And then, she made a nasty teasing smile as if she came up with something. She outstretched her hand towards the fountain pen placed on the side-deck, picked it up and dropped it on the floor on purpose.

"Ah... sorry Taiga, can you pick it up?"

"Hey hey, you all right? Maybe you still feel——NMU?!!'

It was when Taiga looked up to pass her the fountain pen.

She suddenly pulled him by his collar towards the bed and pressed her soft lips against his.

Eh, wh, wai——wait WAIT?!

Not understanding the situation at all, Taiga's thinking overheated all at once.

Why was Haya's face so close to his, why were his and her lips stuck together.

click

"———?!?!?!"

The moment a quiet sound of a camera shutter filled the air, he separated from her.

Haya's terminal seemed to be the source of the sound, in there, was a photo of a boy and a girl kissing——

"Yup yup. It came out well."

"Y-Y-y-you what are you doing?!"

He didn't understand. Neither why would she suddenly kiss him, nor why would she take a picture of it.

Haya showed Taiga the photo's data and said.

"A trade. If you don't agree, I'll show this photo to your little sister."

"ARE YOU A DEVIL?!!"

He didn't even want to try imagining how Fuyuki would react after being shown such a thing.

To avoid that he would do anything——just when he thought that, with a strangely good timing a mail came from Fuyuki. It said 'hurry up and come down'. He checked the clock and realized it was past the meeting time they agreed on.

"Geh... sorry Haya, I'll come again! That photo, erase it properly!"

"Ah——w-wait!"

She tried to stop him as he jumped out in a hurry, he looked back at her.

"...thank you for everything. I'm really grateful."

She said it shyly, with a blush on her cheeks.

Involuntarily, he was fascinated by her beautiful figure combined with her black hair flowing in the wind.

Taiga left the hospital room.

Haya stared at the terminal Iolite has entered, she made a phone call to a certain person with a clear purpose and determination. After eight calls, the other recipient finally responded.

"...it's been a week since we last spoke, Father."

⟨"What do you want. I'm busy so be quick."⟩

Hearing the cold voice her heart almost broke.

She always followed his orders. Never thought about standing up to him, and lived as he ordered her to. That life was to end here and now.

Haya clenched the terminal tightly, as she did that she felt a courage well up inside her.

"Is that so. Well, in short it would be——"

She looked at the sky outside the window, and she announced both ending and the beginning.

"——I declare a war."

In order to continue the dream the girls pursued, she depicted it like that.

Part 2

"Ah, Taigaaa! Over here!"

He rolled out of the hospital into the pleasant sunshine. Taiga looked towards where the energetic voice called him from and saw Rui waving her hands towards him. Fuyuki and Shio stood next to her.

"...it took you quite long. What were you doing?"

"Explaining what happened and such."

Taiga dodged the topic appropriately, Fuyuki entwined their arms as if it was natural and stared at him questioningly. Rui's and Shio's line of sight pierced his arm and was somehow uncomfortable.

In order to deceive them he spoke to all three.

"Sorry to make you do such a tedious work. Shio too in the end had to stay for a week in a hotel because of that."

"I don't mind at all. Thanks to that I could practice housework with Rui-chan and pass Hime-chan's test."

"Did you find a room for yourself?"

"Not yet, but I'll definitely live in this city. This city which Onii-san and Hime-chan lives in."

There was no hesitation in her pupils. Fuyuki noticed that Rui gently stared at her and she made a puzzled expression.

"Rucchan, you look somewhat happy?"

"Really? ...yup, I guess I am."

Rui said so and laughed, she hugged Taiga's other arm.

As her large and soft breasts pressed onto him he involuntarily tried to pull his arm out, but Rui firmly held it.

"Hey hey, Taiga. Rui-san wants a reward."

"A r-reward?"

"Yup. I did my best this time right? So, I don't care when but let's go on a date."

"Please wait a moment Rucchan. If that's the case then Little Sister is the biggest contributor and she should go first."

Seeing Rui rub his body wanting to be spoiled, Fuyuki raised her eyebrows. She strongly embraced his arm as if to compete with Rui and raised her index finger to point at Taiga.

"Little Sister hasn't forgotten, the date she was promised two weeks ago still hasn't happened. That's right, with this it'll turn into a short trip, how about that?"

"Grr, that's not fair. What does Shio-chan think?"

"Eh, umm... I'm a bit envious..."

As the three happily chatted, Taiga looked up at the sky.

The world of light they were always aiming for.

Now he was standing in the place they always longed for, no matter how many sins they've piled up.

He desperately grabbed onto the light people like Asumi Aoko reached out to, but couldn't grasp.

"...God, I beg you. Please let days like these continue."

Taiga muttered a quiet prayer and continued to walk with the girls.

—In the pleasant and warm sunlight he will hold onto the happiness that was granted to him.

*Cheers for the
good work*



Afterword

The long awaited leading role of the scheming student council president!

It's been a while (probably) since you read this, this is Kazuma Jouchi.

How did you like the third volume of 'ELYSION virtual region'?

This time it's a story of a gifted and loved by virtual world girl as well as Kiritou Haya who was subtly involved with the main story starting from the first volume.

...ah, as usual from this point onwards it's gonna include spoilers. These are endnotes for the people who read the volume.

The new character this time is Asumi Aoko (although she disappears by the end of the volume) and is the core of the story of this 'ELYSION virtual region'. A girl who has a talent greater than Fuyuki, and yet is used and broken—her revenge that has began starting with the first volume hasn't succeeded because of Taiga and Haya. All the kindness Aoko had in her heart—in the end was all accumulated inside Iora and fuelled her last act.

This time there were major changes in this work's romance relationships.

Fuyuki took a straight approach and relayed her feelings of wanting to be more than 'siblings'. Rui is going at a heart-soothing pace. And seeing Rui like that Shio has reaffirmed her feelings.

By the way, in the author's imagination Shio is a perverted girl. She got excited by thinking of seducing her best friend's dear person—a glimpse of that could be seen in the massage scene. In fact it was also a setup for a scent fetish.

Then it's Rui-chan who's overflowing with motherly features + has a huge chest. When I first looked at her in the swimsuit I was like "What's this! It's spilling out isn't it!" and ended up staring at it for five minutes (even now I

occasionally look at it). The lap pillow scene is one of my favourite. Rui-chan the true legal wife.

And there's no need to say anything about Fuyuki. The sensual and lovely cute little sister is the best!

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Taiga's and the others story has come to a conclusion. From now onwards the girls will accompany him on his full of light road.

Now then, if willed so by fate let's meet again in a different story.

See you next time if there's a chance.

Notes and References

1. ↑ Means third most in french.
2. ↑ I feel like I'll hold a grudge over illustrator not illustrating Rui with ponytail. Nghhhh.
3. ↑ To be exact it refers to 'all you can eat' type restaurants
4. ↑ Now, a quick explanation: Asumi Aoko is written as 阿董青子. The two middle kanji's were taken (bolded) 阿**董**青**子** and 石 (character for stone) was added making up 董青石 – which refers to Iolite (the gem). This is the first time Iolite was written in kanji.

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